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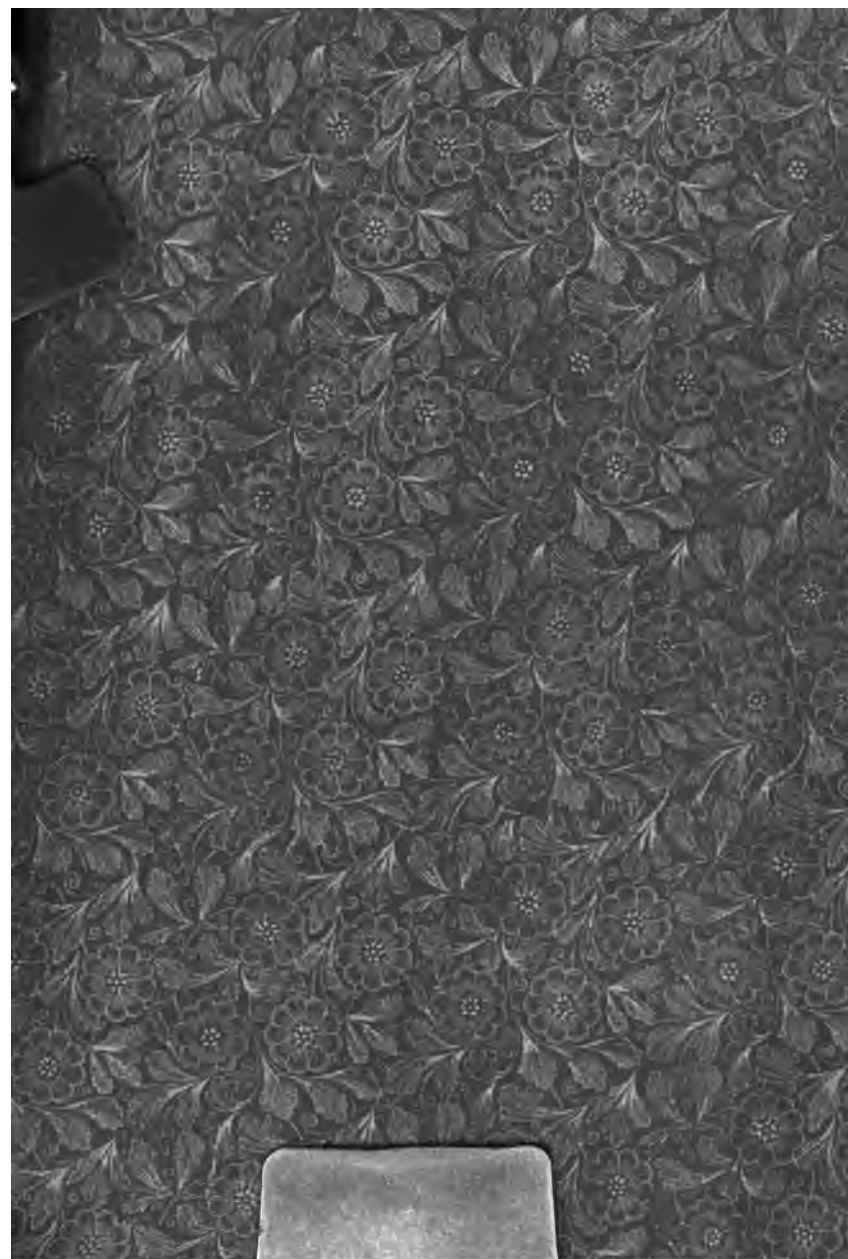
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HIRAM GREG

by

J. CROWTHER HIRST.







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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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HIRAM GREG.



CHAPTER I.

MISS CRIMPTON GIVES SOME ADVICE—WITH
THE USUAL SUCCESS.

WHEN Charlotte Wharton left her home the grey darkness of a November morning still hung like a pall over the town. The servants were already busy with their morning duties, but she chose her opportunity with such care and moved so noiselessly that she attracted no attention. The road leading down into the town was almost deserted, and she only met one or two small groups of men, with bags of tools over their shoulders or in their hands, going to their daily work,

and an occasional cart rumbling slowly along on its way to a coal-mine lying several miles further up the road. Neither were there many people to see or to be seen as she came into the more populated parts. The factory operatives were already busily at work inside the great mills, which could be seen in every direction, looming, huge and sullen, in the dusky air, with the yellow light streaming from the windows with which their fronts were chequered; and the bells which would give the signal for stopping the engines for the short time allowed for breakfast would not ring for a good half-hour or more. Signs of life, however, were observable about many of the cottages, and through the windows as she passed she could catch glimpses of newly kindled fires, and of active housewives making preparations for the husbands' breakfasts, or dressing the children who were not yet old enough to have become victims of the grinding mon-

sters, housed in the many-windowed mills, who would claim them as life-long bond-slaves by-and-by. A few of the earlier shopkeepers were taking down their shutters in order to be ready for the first straggling customers; and when she reached the reduced row of houses in which Miss Crimpton lived she correctly inferred, from the lights in the workroom, that that brisk little lady was astir, and that her "young ladies" were already plying their needles.

Charlotte had never been out at so early an hour in the winter time, except, indeed, when, still earlier, she had returned, wrapped in soft warm cloaks or shawls, and comfortably seated in a closed carriage, from a dance. Then she had seen nothing of the life of her poorer brothers and sisters. The darkness seemed a pleasant change from the glare of the ballroom, and, with fresh memories of admiring partners, and the agreeable languor following upon excitement

and exercise stealing gently over her limbs, and the prospect of dreamless sleep until she should be roused to share a late breakfast in a large, warm room—with these things, the chilly morning air had not appeared at all unbearable. But during this walk she saw Millvale in an altogether new aspect. She realized more fully than any previous experience enabled her to do the difference between her lot and that of the vast toiling masses of the town. To her it seemed still night, and yet thousands had been labouring for hours amid the whirring machinery, and not men only, but women and children too. Nor was this morning a solitary exception. Every day throughout the year, with only the blessed Sundays to break the monotony, the same thing was repeated. And then, in their homes what miserable compensation they had for these days of drudgery! Why they should still consider life worth living she could not tell.

But this thought brought Heather Street to her mind, and she remembered with what brave, cheerful spirits the majority, if not the whole, of the Heather Street people faced their lot, and what a beauty their mutual helpfulness, their faith, and hope, and love shed upon an existence which one might expect to find very coarse and barren. The thought of Heather Street, however, brought also some painful recollections, and these made her cheeks burn as she ascended Miss Crimpton's steps.

She knocked at the door, and in a few moments Miss Crimpton herself appeared, with her hair in curl-papers and a large basin in her hand.

"Law, Miss Wharton," cried the little milliner, "I thought you were the milk! Whoever would have thought of seeing you at this time of day? But come in, do. It's enough to give you your death to stand there in the cold."

"Thank you, I will come in."

"I have no fire yet in this front room, and perhaps you wouldn't mind stepping into my own parlour, though I haven't had breakfast, and the things are on the table. It is very different to what you are accustomed to seeing; but I always find that real ladies like you, my dear, if you will excuse the liberty, are willing to put up with things at which sham ladies, such as come here sometimes in the way of business, turn up their noses, though they needn't."

"You are really very kind, and there is no need for apologies, unless I offer them for intruding at such an untimely hour."

"I hope you'll do nothing of the sort, Miss Wharton. Business is business, and I'm sure you must have something very pressing to bring you out this morning."

The little woman drew up a chair, and stirred the fire as she spoke.

"I am afraid my business is not likely to

be of a very profitable character," replied Charlotte.

"Ah, well," said Miss Crimpton, interrupting, "we take one piece of work with another and strike an average. We're obliged to do it, Miss Wharton, and where's the odds if the average comes right in the end?"

"I have come to you, Miss Crimpton, to ask you to allow me to trespass on your kindness. Family troubles—I am certain you will pardon me if I do not go into details—have compelled me to leave my home, and I am now going to try to make my own way in the world."

Surprise and curiosity seemed to have temporarily frozen the fountains of Miss Crimpton's volubility, since she could only exclaim, "Dear me! You don't say!"

"Since meeting Miss de Sayne and her husband here," Charlotte proceeded, "I have often talked to you about them, and told

you of my secret desire to appear upon the stage ; and now, if you can tell me where I can find Mr. Everington, I intend to go to him and ask him for an engagement."

"But, my dear young lady, your father and mother ! What will they say to this scheme ? Do I understand that they know nothing of it, and that you have left home without their knowledge or consent ?"

"Yes ; I could stay at home no longer, and must of necessity strike out a path for myself. They do not know what my intentions are, and I do not wish them to know. When I have made a name and won a position, it will be soon enough to acquaint them with what I have done."

"I must say, my dear," said Miss Crimpton doubtfully, smoothing down her dress, and looking troubled and perplexed, "that I do not like to be mixed up in this affair. You see, it places a heavy responsibility upon me. I do not wish to pry into your

concerns, but a young lady like yourself ought to have a very serious cause for leaving her home unknown to her parents ; and if I might take the liberty, I would ask you to reconsider the subject and go back, and so save both yourself and them a great amount of trouble and anxiety. What will be their feelings when they find you have fled ? ”

“ A letter which I left will explain my reasons for quitting my father’s house, and will inform them that I am about to make an effort to earn my own living. As to reconsidering, I have considered and reconsidered, and, with help or without, I mean to persevere. I regret,” said Charlotte, stiffly, rising to go, “ that I have troubled you, but I trust you will not think it part of your duty to betray the confidence which I have reposed in you. You will perhaps be kind enough to forget that I have been here.”

“Now, my dear, how can you talk so!” cried Miss Crimpton in distress. “Sit down, pray do! There! Now have you had breakfast? Well, then, you shall share mine, and we’ll talk this business over. And to prevent any intrusion I’ll fetch the bacon and coffee in myself, and give my maid enough work to keep her well employed so that she won’t come peeping and prying round, and setting half a dozen heads wondering and half a dozen tongues chattering about your being here.”

Charlotte, it must be confessed, even thus early in her adventure, was feeling miserable and lonely; but she reasoned that if she yielded to such feelings there was but sorry hope for her enterprise; and she therefore banished gloomy thoughts as far as she could, and chatted cheerfully to Miss Crimpton during the progress of the meal.

“So you’re determined, are you, my dear?” said that little lady.

"Quite. I cannot and I will not return home," replied Charlotte, in a tone which showed that any further discussion or persuasion on that point would be useless.

"And equally determined to try the stage?"

"Yes. That I believe is my calling. Besides, I do not know what else to do."

"Well, my dear, I cannot control you; but I must warn you. You know that the profession is not in good odour with the public?"


"Certainly; but I should not have expected you to advance that as an objection against it."

"Neither should I, Miss Wharton, if I did not know that there is some ground for the suspicion which many folks feel. Actors and actresses are, as a rule, good, moral people, and it's very much to their credit that they are. But there are black sheep among them, and it would be very queer if there weren't. Because you see, my dear,

their life lays them open to so many temptations which other people never feel. But it is the actresses, those who are young and pretty, who are most tempted, and it is not a light matter for any young woman to put herself in a position where she may be exposed to such severe trials. I know what I am saying, my dear," continued the little woman, with a touch of pathos in her voice, "for I was young and pretty once myself, though you might not think it to look at me now."

"Thank you very much for the caution," returned Charlotte, not ungratefully. "Forewarned is fore-armed ; and I trust I shall be able to protect myself."

Miss Crimpton looked at the erect figure and beautiful face and sighed. She had hoped her words would have had a different effect. She saw that any attempt to turn Charlotte from her purpose by direct appeal would be fruitless.



“As to Mr. Everington,” she said, “I must say, my dear, that I wish it were not necessary for you to have any dealings with him. I don’t like him, and that’s the truth. His position in the profession is not a good one, and what position he has is owing almost entirely to his wife. He made a success here, it is true, but I’ve not heard good accounts of him since.”

“But do you know anything positively—anything against his character? May not the rumours you have heard be the results of professional jealousy?”

“I don’t *know* anything; but sometimes one gets an impression——”

“Which may turn out to be quite unfounded,” interposed Charlotte.

“Well, we’ll hope so in this instance; but I am afraid that you will be disappointed with his company. Why not try some one else.”

“For the very good reason that he is the

only manager to whom I am known, and that I have some little ground for thinking that he would not be unwilling to give me a chance. If I found him very different from what I could wish, the remedy would be in my own hands. I could leave him, and perhaps I should see my way more clearly then."


"Well, my dear, as you will have your way, I will tell you where you will find Mr. and Mrs. Everington. They are at present at Castlefield, so that you will have a long journey before you reach them."

Miss Crimpton saw that further argument would be thrown away. She had some acquaintance with the manager of a theatre in a large city in the Midlands, and for a moment she felt inclined to recommend Charlotte to apply to him for an engagement. But as she did not regard Charlotte's determination to go upon the stage as likely to result in her permanently adopting the

dramatic profession, she shrewdly thought it might be better for her to have a rough experience to commence with—an experience which would probably lead to her abandonment of the stage and her speedy return home. Miss Crimpton therefore determined to let her follow out her own devices, much to Charlotte's gratification and relief.

"Thank you very much," cried Charlotte. "I shall not mind the journey. But now I must beg of you to grant me two more favours. Will you permit me to remain here quietly until evening? If I were to go through the town by daylight, some one would be almost sure to recognize me, but as soon as it is dark I can go to the station and take a train that will reach Castlefield comparatively early. There is one, I believe, about five o'clock, and the journey ought not to occupy more than three hours, or three hours and a half at most."

"Yes, my dear, you can stay."



“Then I want you to promise to write to me occasionally. I must hear of father and mother sometimes.” Charlotte’s voice quivered, but she mastered her emotion by a strong effort and proceeded—“And you will be sure to know whether they are well or not. You will write to me sometimes, Miss Crimpton?”

“I will indeed, my dear, and I am very glad you have asked me,” replied the little milliner, wiping her eyes. “Dear me!” she cried, in her usual brisk manner, “it is close upon nine o’clock, and I have not taken my curl-papers down. You’ll excuse me for a few minutes, I’m sure.”

Charlotte remained all day in the house of her kind-hearted acquaintance, and Miss Crimpton kept the servant out of the room where she sat by the most ingenious expedients which such a tiny brain ever devised. In the afternoon a thick yellow fog gathered over the town, shutting out the view of the

houses opposite, and making the people who went shivering along the pavements seem dim and ghost-like as they issued out of the mist and were buried again in mist as soon as they had crossed the little space that the eye could pierce. Before three o'clock it was necessary to burn lights in the shops and offices and mills ; and when five o'clock came there was little danger of any one being recognized in the streets of Millvale. Charlotte walked through the darkness and the fog to the railway station. The voices of the people in the streets sounding strangely muffled, made her start. She could almost have imagined herself the perpetrator of some crime, fleeing from justice.

There were but few passengers waiting on the platform—it was not an evening to encourage loiterers ; and the people who were there were too much occupied in attending to their business, or in stamping about to keep up the circulation in their feet,

to notice their fellow-travellers. Charlotte took her place in a first-class carriage, pulled up the windows, and in due time the engine whistled and snorted, and as the train steamed away the fog rolled in and filled the place where it had stood.

CHAPTER II.

CHARLOTTE EXTENDS HER ACQUAINTANCE WITH MEMBERS OF "THE PROFESSION."

BETWEEN eight and nine o'clock the train drew up in the Castlefield railway station. Here the fog was not so dense as in Millvale, but still it was heavy and cold enough to penetrate through the thickest clothing and to chill one to the bones. Charlotte stood on the platform with a strange sense of desolation in her heart. She knew no one of whom to make inquiries, and for the first time in her life she felt what it is to be utterly dependent on one's own resources. The last of the passengers who had alighted from the train had bustled away, and the

man who stood at the door shouted to her, "Ticket, mum." She gave him her ticket, and as she passed out of the station she saw a shadowy cabman who had despaired of obtaining a fare wrapping a rug about his knees preparatory to driving away.

"Cab, miss?" he cried, descending from his box with great alacrity. "Where to, miss?"

"Which is the best hotel in the town?" she asked, entering the vehicle.

"The Brudneth Harms is *the* hotel," replied the muffled Jehu, "but," he added, dubiously, "it's a hexpensive house. Then there's the White Swan, which is mostly patronized by commercial gents; and there's the Elephant and Castle, where the farmers 'as their hordinary——"

"Drive to the Brudneth Arms."

At the Brudneth Arms, a comfortable old hostelry, where, on certain high days, county assemblies were held, and whose quiet

passages and heavily furnished rooms bespoke the utmost respectability, she secured a bedroom and a private sitting-room. More for form's sake than because she felt really hungry, she ordered supper ; but as she sat before the fire, which had been kindled while she was divesting herself of her travelling attire, youth and nature asserted themselves and she did full justice to the liberal fare of the Brudneth Arms. Nor when, wearied by an almost sleepless night and the unusual fatigues of the day, she retired to rest, were the thoughts which crowded upon her mind sufficient to keep her awake, or to prevent her from sinking into a deep and dreamless sleep.

During the night the fog changed into a dull and disagreeable drizzle ; and it was pleasant to turn from looking at the muddy street and the sombre red brick offices facing the window, to the bright fire and the trim servant spreading the table.

"Can you tell me," said Charlotte, addressing the maid, "where the theatre is?"

"The theatre, miss?" returned the girl, in a tone of surprise, looking at Charlotte with a curious glance. "Yes, miss, what is called the theatre is in a little court opening out of the Market Square."

"Is it a good theatre?"

"I cannot truly say as it is; but I've never been into it myself. Nobody goes to the theatre in Castlefield, miss."

"Nobody? Then why is it kept open?"

"By nobody I mean, of course, nobody as is anybody. Low people goes, I dare say, but ladies and gentlemen never."

"Could you get me a play-bill?"


"No, miss, I couldn't indeed. Missis wouldn't have one in the house."

This was not encouraging; but after all, thought Charlotte, why should she notice the opinion of an ignorant servant-girl, perhaps


a Methodist, with the inveterate prejudices of her class ? She, however, made no further attempt to gain information in the Brudneth Arms ; but a little before eleven o'clock sallied forth to make her own observations.

Castlefield, in its day, had been a pretty little market town, the centre of an agricultural district. While it still retained this character, it was, as a rule, as quiet and dull as such little country towns usually are. Once a week, however, it had been accustomed to rouse itself from its habitual lethargy. Every Tuesday its market-place was crowded with cattle, sheep, and pigs ; and the farmers, who had driven in from the surrounding country in their gigs and light carts, might be seen standing about, examining pigs with a critical eye, and punching the ribs of patient cows, as if seeking to discover their sense of humour by an anatomical examination, while buxom wives and daughters, collected round the rude

pillars of the covered market hall, were selling their butter and eggs, or, their dairy produce being disposed of, flocking into the drapers' shops, there to purchase some bit of finery which should help to keep awake at least the feminine portion of the congregation of some village church on the succeeding Sunday. But the railway had come and worked such a change that many persons not so old as the "oldest inhabitant" could scarcely recognize the Castlefield of their youth. The black fairy, too, who delights in grime and dirt, had passed over the district, and cast down her divining rod, and in many a once pleasant field a windlass spread its straddling legs, the green herbage was buried beneath heaps of shale, and a blight seemed to fall from tall chimneys upon trees and hedges. Large workshops and manufactories were in active operation, or in the course of erection, and long rows of raw brick cottages were smothering the quiet




streets and the picturesque old houses. Before the old townsfolk, dull of comprehension and slow of speech, were able to fully appreciate and discuss the changes that were being wrought, they found themselves jostled by an ever-increasing multitude of rough-spoken miners and artisans, and by the quick-witted business men, who had small respect for the county names before which for generations Castlefield had bent in awe, and for the habits and customs which had been esteemed venerable in Castlefield from time immemorial. The weekly market seemed to be overshadowed by the newer activities which had come into existence, and, as the glory of the market waned, the atmosphere grew dull and smoke-laden, and the few ancient houses with black-timbered fronts still remaining appeared to look down sadly upon the altered scene, as if conscious that they belonged to a departed age, and could not long survive in the innovating modern time.



Passing up a narrow street, in which some of these ancient houses stood, and crossing the almost deserted market-place, Charlotte saw a board stretched across a passage between two shops, bearing the inscription—

“THEATRE ROYAL.”

On the walls, beneath the board, on either side, remnants of play-bills hung or slowly peeled away under the incessant pattering of the rain. Down the alley, facing the street, was a door surrounded by a rough porch of planks, the roof of the porch being a kind of box with a glass front. At night this box held a candle, thus enabling those whom it might concern to trace upon the glass, in letters cut from an old poster, and stuck on with paste, the magic words “Dress Circle;” but though the candle might effect so much, unaided it could hardly show the way up the four broken stone steps by which the door was ap-



proached. A second door to the right, opening on a level with the ground, with no porch and with no glass-fronted box, bore the inscription, in letters which had once been white, "Pit and Gallery." Following the turn of the passage round the corner of the building, Charlotte saw a third door, narrower than the others, and approached, like that leading to the dress circle, by several stone steps. As this was near the back of the theatre it was reasonable to suppose that it was the stage door. Having been unable to gain admittance by either of the others she walked down to this and found it open.

On the top step, but far enough inside to be sheltered from the weather, stood a shrivelled little man, his lips pursed up as if to whistle, but making no sound. A very shiny hat was stuck on the back of his head, a brown overcoat, threadbare about the seams and ragged at the button-holes, was

pulled tightly around his body, and his legs were encased in black trousers, shiny above the knees, and fringed, in a manner not designed by the tailor, where they came in contact with his boots. He was so deeply engaged in his silent whistling and in watching the rain dripping from a broken spout which ran along the back of a house forming the opposite side of the alley, that he did not notice Charlotte until she spoke.

"Can you tell me," she said, "if this is the theatre?"

"The theatre?" said the little man, withdrawing his eyes from the spout, and touching his hat. "Yes, it's the theatre, marm; but this is a private entrance."

"Certainly. I understand that. Is Mr. Everington within?"

"No, marm, he is not at the present moment. But won't you step in out of the rain? I beg your pardon, marm, for keeping you standing in the wet."

Charlotte accepted this invitation, and felt a curious thrill pass through her as she stood for the first time inside a "stage door." She glanced round to see what sort of place this door would lead her to, but beyond a small square landing, and one narrow flight of steps leading up and another narrow flight of steps leading down, and both ending in darkness, there was nothing to be seen.

"Mr. Everington," said the little man, again touching his hat and backing up two steps to leave room for Miss Wharton on the landing, "will, I expect, be here in a quarter of an hour. A rehearsal is called for half-past eleven, and it's gone eleven now. Would you like to wait, or can I give him any message, marm?"

"If a rehearsal is to take place all the company will be here, I suppose?"

"Yes, marm, every one of them. We play two dramars for Larpont's benefit to-

night—*The Impress of the Blood-stained Hand*, and *The Perils of the Burning Lime Kiln*. There's to be a *pa sool* between the pieces, and Larpont will, of course, make a speech."

"Are you one of the company?" asked Charlotte, struck with a new idea, and looking with undisguised dismay straight into the little man's eyes, which, as he stood balancing himself on the step, were about on a level with her own. This look and the emphasis she placed on the personal pronoun, evidently disconcerted him so much that he had some difficulty in preventing himself from sitting down in a very hasty and undignified manner.

"I 'ave the h-onour, marm," he returned, in a subdued tone. "I am Perkerville, marm; Perkerville, the low comedian, marm, not, I trust, quite unknown to fame. You have heard of Perkerville, marm."

"I regret to say that I do not recall the

name at the moment ; but," added Charlotte, considerably, "I must say that my knowledge of theatrical affairs is very limited, and there are many men of high reputation of whom I have not heard."

" Ah ! " ejaculated Mr. Perkerville, shaking his long, flexible fingers in a manner intended to express feelings which words could not utter, and then clenching his hands tightly and plunging them down to the bottom of his coat pockets, " Ah ! "

"I wish to see Mr. Everington on a matter of business. Can you oblige me with his address? I wish to see him in private, and should prefer not to meet the rest of the company at present."

" He lives," said Mr. Perkerville, "in Church Lane, marm, at number five."

" And where is Church Lane ? "

" You go along the bottom of the market-place, and take the first turning to the right, and then the first turn to the left. Five is

the number. But Mr. Everington will not be in until half-past one or two o'clock. Mrs. Everington you will find at home, marm, at any hour."

"Indeed, will she not be at the rehearsal?"

"No, marm. Mrs. Everington *is* Mrs. Everington at present. Miss de Sayne's existence is, so to speak, temporarily suspended, and our little company is, for the time being, shorn of its brightest ornament."

Charlotte, though not quite able to interpret this enigmatical statement, did not pause to receive further explanations; but, thanking Mr. Perkerville for his courtesy, bid him good morning. As she left the passage in which the theatre stood, she encountered a tall, thin-faced man, wrapped in a large cloak, and a pale anxious-eyed woman of poor and shabby appearance. Could these be more members of the company—more ornaments of the profession, the possessors of names not unknown to fame?

She almost shuddered as the question entered her mind.

“Hello, Larpont!” cried Mr. Perkerville, as the tall man and his companion entered the stage door, “did you see a lady as you came down?”

“Several,” returned Larpont, curtly. “Get out of the way, man, and don’t block up the passage. It’s too cold, by Jove, to keep one shivering here.”

Mr. Perkerville, thus adjured, led the way up the dark staircase, and into a small room containing a mouldy smell, a mildewed mirror, and a few seats.

“Did you mean the young lady we met in the alley, Mr. Perkerville?” asked Mr. Larpont’s female companion.

“Yes,” returned the low comedian. “But it don’t matter.”

“What don’t matter, Mr. Perkerville?”

“Nothin’ don’t matter, if Larpont don’t care to hear about her.”

"Tell me, and never mind him," said the lady, with that supreme indifference to the opinion of the male animal which only a wife of some years' standing can attain.

"What of her, man? Say on," put in Mr. Larpont with a solemn scowl.

"Ain't she a stunner!" ejaculated Mr. Perkerville, producing an effect with his flexible fingers which on the stage never failed to bring down the gallery, but which seemed to fall flat on Mr. and Mrs. Larpont.

"Whence came she, and for what?" asked Mr. Larpont, disdaining any notice of the low comedian's enthusiasm.

"Did she take any tickets for the benefit?" inquired the lady, hopefully.

"No, marm; she was not aware of the benefit until I named it to her. Why, marm, she had not heard of me; she did not know the name of Perkerville!"

"And how should she, sir-r-r? The 'igh-born and the noble condescend not to

buffoons !” Mr. Larpont uttered these words with a heavy frown, took two short steps forward, with his right hand swung his cloak over his left shoulder, and threw himself upon a chair with a sigh.

“Who’s a buffoon ?” cried Mr. Perkerville, rapidly clasping and unclasping his fingers, as if eager to close them upon an offending throat.

“Peace, man, peace ! I am weary of thee !” replied Mr. Larpont, gloomily.

“Who’s a buffoon, I say ?” again cried Mr. Perkerville with increasing warmth. “Do you know, sir, you’ve insulted me ?”

“Don’t be a pair of johnnies !” interposed Mrs. Larpont, with a tone of supreme contempt. We confess our ignorance as to the nature of a johnny ; but Mr. Larpont and Mr. Perkerville were, doubtless, better informed on this important point. However this might be, Mrs. Larpont’s remonstrance produced the desired effect.

"I was rash," said the tragedian, rising and extending his hand. "Pardon me, Perkerville; pardon my hasty words and let them sink into deep oblivion."

"All right, my boy, we'll say no more about 'em now you've done the 'andsome."

"And now," continued Mr. Larpont, still holding the comedian's hand, and working his newly reconciled friend's arm up and down like a pump-handle while he spoke, "what say you as to this mysterious cr-reecher who knew not the name of Perkerville—Perkerville the comic, Perkerville the irresistible, Perkerville at whose infinite humour the muse of Tr-ragedy herself might smile?"

"Thank you, old fellow, thank you for your 'andsome remarks; but 'ave a care of my shoulder. You'll work the pin out of the hinge if you carry on much in this style."

"Ever ready with a merry jest," muttered

Mr. Larpont. "Pin out of hinge—good. Would that my heart were light as his."

"She inquired," said the jester, reverting to the main topic of discourse, "for Everington, and as she wished to see him in private I sent her to his lodgings."

"Are you sure there is no mistake? 'Twas not"—the tragedian's voice was hoarse and his eyes rolled to indicate suppressed emotion—" 'twas not Larpont that she said?"

"I'll Larpont her, if she comes Larponing here," cried the female possessor of the name in question. "Why should she want Larpont?"

"Why should she want Everington?" retorted the tragedian with dark suggestiveness gleaming from his visual orbs. "I see it all! She has witnessed one of my triumphs—mayhap she has seen me as 'Roderigo' in *The Brigand Butcher*; mayhap as the pirate captain in *Cross Bones*


and Skull—her heart has been touched, and she has whispered to the stars ‘I will seek him out!’ An envious fate or a badly printed bill has led her to confuse my name with that of Everington, and hence she asks for him. But even should she find me, hers I cannot be! Ah, why was I born to torture fair young hearts? I would not have it thus, and yet ’tis so. Ah, destiny!”

Mr. Perkerville laughed aloud, but Mrs. Larpont turned away from her fated lord with some remark about braying a fool in a mortar. The doom-driven tragedian was about calling Mr. Perkerville to account for his levity, which might have resulted in another quarrel, when several fresh members of Mr. Everington’s company arrived, thus bringing about a diversion, and shortly afterwards that gentleman appeared, and the whole party were soon involved in the intricacies and excitements of *The Impress*

of the Blood-stained Hand, and of *The Perils of the Burning Lime Kiln*.

Meanwhile Charlotte returned to the Brudneth Arms, there to await the time when, as she had been assured by Mr. Perkerville, she might count upon seeing Mr. Everington at his lodgings in Church Lane. The little she had seen of the theatre where for the present Mr. Everington was putting his theories relative to considering the public into practice, the character of the actor whose acquaintance she had made, the very titles of the pieces announced for representation, all conspired to rouse the suspicion that the real dramatic world might be very different from her ideal dramatic world. So far she had perceived none of the high-toned romance which she had associated with the stage. That little man with his shiny hat, and fringed trousers, and incessant "marm," had given her a great shock. There was nothing heroic about him, especially when

he maltreated the poor letter "h." But, then, she thought, he was only a comedian, and it is not in low comedy that one looks for the heroic or the poetical. Had she seen some of the others, they would, doubtless, have been of a better stamp. The theatre, too, might be a perfect little paradise inside, though the exterior was not inviting. It is a great mistake, she sagely argued, to judge from outside appearances only, whether in the case of men or theatres. Those titles, again, what were they but outside appearances, which might belie the realities which lay behind? At the worst, supposing the pieces as bad as the titles, they might be exceptions, the rule being plays fitted to refine the feelings and to purify the mind. But, whatever was the truth as to these points, she was committed to seeing Mr. Everington, and to making an attempt under his direction if he would accept her services. And until the hour for seeing him



came, there was nothing to be done but to have some lunch and to wish that the rain would cease.

Bearing Mr. Perkerville's lucid directions in mind, she had not much difficulty in discovering Church Lane. This was a region which had not been touched by the transforming spirit that was abroad in Castlefield. It was just as narrow and badly paved and defective in point of drainage as it could have been twenty or fifty years before. The houses which lined each side were irregular in height, and reminded one of a number of decrepit or drunken men who can only stand by crowding close together and propping each other up. The blinds and curtains with which their windows were adorned were torn or soiled, and most of them seemed to have cut the acquaintance of the laundress long ago. At many of the doors slatternly bare-armed women lolled, varying the monotony of this

pastime by screaming in shrill tones at the children playing in the gutters. Number five was neither better nor worse than the rest, and Charlotte knocked with a sinking heart. A girl of some thirteen summers, with a baby in her arms, opened the door and stared vacantly at the visitor.

"Does Mr. Everington live here?" asked Charlotte.

"Yes," said the girl with a nod.

"Is he in?" pursued Charlotte, as the maiden did not move from the doorway.

"Yes, he's in there," returned the little nurse, backing and pointing to a door. "Go in."

With these words she retreated into the kitchen, leaving Charlotte to close the street door and to find Mr. Everington as best she could. Tapping with her knuckles at the door indicated a voice bid her "Come in." When she entered, in obedience to this summons, her appearance evidently caused

no slight consternation. Mr. Everington rose hastily and glanced round at the table whereon were the remains of dinner, and at the shabby furniture, with an air of shame and vexation. Mrs. Everington tried to hide a piece of work at which she had been stitching, but her movement was not quick enough to prevent Charlotte from seeing that it was a miniature garment upon which she had been engaged. The dressing-gown that the gentleman wore when Charlotte first made his acquaintance at Miss Crimpton's still did duty as a comfortable and easy undress, but it was faded, and seemed to indicate in its decay that both it and its owner had come down in the world. Mrs. Everington's attire was neat, but about her, too, there were signs of straitened means which no eye less inexperienced than Charlotte's would have failed to note. Charlotte however, did not mark these details, although she received the impression that the

fortunes of the Everingtons were not at the present in the ascendant.


“An unexpected honour, madam. May I inquire—why, it cannot be that I have seen you in happier, or, at least, in other days?” said Mr. Everington.

“Miss Wharton, whom we met at Millvale, I believe,” said Mrs. Everington, rising.

“I am glad to find myself remembered,” replied Charlotte to these greetings, “but I must apologize for my unannounced intrusion.”

“Do not apologize for what gives us so much pleasure,” said Mr. Everington, regaining his composure. “Permit me to offer you a chair. I fear our maid was—in fact, was not at home; but you are welcome to our humble—our very humble—tent, if I may so express myself.”

Charlotte accepted the proffered seat; and as Mr. and Mrs. Everington both waited for her to speak, she began with some trepidation.



“I was encouraged to come to you, Mr. Everington, to ask for an engagement as a member of your company, by some words which I happened to overhear, and by the conversation we had in reference to candidates for the stage, when I met you in Millvale. Perhaps you will not recollect the conversation to which I refer?”

“I remember it, Miss Wharton,” said Mrs. Everington, looking at her with sorrowful surprise, “and I regret that it has made such a lasting impression on your mind.”

The surprise of Mr. Everington was equal to that of his wife; but no regret mingled with his amazement, as he thought he saw a prospect of something better than the price of half a dozen benefit tickets.

“I do recall the occasion to which you allude,” he said.

Charlotte then explained, as she had done to Miss Crimpton, her reason for leaving home, and asked Mr. Everington if he would

be able to give her an opportunity to test her powers.

“Humph!” said that gentleman, pretending to weigh the proposition very carefully, as if his answer were not quite determined upon. “This is a serious question, Miss Wharton, especially in the present condition of affairs. The fact is, to put the truth bluntly, we have been down on our luck lately, and I could not afford to pay such a salary as you might expect.”

“I am not in immediate want of money, and should be glad to have an opportunity of appearing; and I should not wish you to incur any loss or to run any risk.”

“That alters the case. You showed from the first a due appreciation of the difficulties of our profession. We can make a trial, and shall thus ascertain how the public receives you. Upon the verdict of the public anything beyond a trial must depend. Miss de Sayne’s name is, as you are perhaps

aware, not at present on the bills, and I have not filled up her place. Indeed it would not be easy under any circumstances to fill up her place."

"I am sure it would not," said Charlotte, glancing at the lady in question, who was looking fixedly at her husband, and did not seem at all pleased by the compliment to her which he had insinuated into his speech.

"But you shall have an appearance," he continued, "and with your voice and figure—you will excuse me if I look at you now from a professional point of view, if I look at you with the eyes of the public, if I may so express myself—with your voice and figure, you ought to do well. Of course you would be willing to sign an agreement to remain with my company for a stipulated term, if you made a success!"

"Reginald Everington," cried his wife, "I cannot let you take advantage of this young lady's ignorance without a protest!"

Miss Wharton, we are poor, miserably poor. The theatre here is a wretched place, and the people about us are not fit associates for you. Be warned, and have nothing more to do with us or them. Do not sign any agreement until you know what you are doing."

"My dear, you are excited, and had better retire," said the manager, with a dark scowl. "Let me beg of you, for your own sake, to keep quiet."

"I will retire, sir, if you mean to persist. I cannot remain as a party to the deception you are practising on this young lady. Miss Wharton, remember I warned you."

With these words Mrs. Everington left the room.

"You will excuse my wife," said Mr. Everington, as soon as the door was closed, "but she never did understand business, and at present she is subject to strange hallucinations, as I believe is not uncommon with ladies in her condition. She will be sorry

for this outburst when she is calmer. And now for your answer."

"I am willing to accept your terms and make the experiment."

Charlotte's mind was not free from doubt, and Mr. Everington's explanation did not altogether remove her fears, but she spoke firmly nevertheless. If Mrs. Everington's warning were justified to the uttermost she would not be irrevocably bound. At present there were before her only two alternatives : to accept Mr. Everington's proposition, or to return to Millvale and subject herself again to the importunities of her father and mother in reference to her marriage with Henderson. Against the latter all her pride rose in revolt ; she preferred risking the evils she knew not of to returning to those from which she had fled.

"Then I will draw up the agreement in the usual form," said Mr. Everington. "Shall we say a month ? We remain in

Castlefield only a few nights more, and then go on to Ferringham. A month would enable you to try your wings here, if I may so express myself, and to bring you out in Ferringham as a star if all goes well. Shall we say a month ? ”

“ Yes.”

The agreement was soon drawn and signed, and Charlotte thus became a member of Mr. Everington’s travelling company.

“ We must have you out the day after to-morrow,” remarked the manager.

“ That is very early, is it not ? I could scarcely be ready by that time.”

“ You must do your best, Miss Wharton, and you will find that you can do a great deal of work in a short time when you are pushed.”

“ But in what part ? ”

“ That I will give you to-morrow morning. If you will be at the theatre at eleven I will put a new piece in rehearsal. Pro-

bably you would like to attend the performance to-night," continued Mr. Everington, with a smile that was not pleasant to see. "If so, of course the theatre is open to you as one of the company."

Charlotte rose to go, leaving Mr. Everington to gloat over the probable effect upon the public, which he was so anxious at all times to consider, of the new attraction which he had secured, and to meditate upon the means of making that attraction as profitable as possible to himself.

CHAPTER III.

“IN FRONT” AND “BEHIND.”

DETERMINED to look on the bright side of affairs so long as such a side was discoverable, Charlotte entered that part of the Castlefield theatre which was dignified by the name of the “dress circle.” Why it should be so called when there was nothing circular about it, and when no one in what is conventionally known as dress ever by any chance appeared in it, is a mystery. The only solution of this mystery we can suggest is that in every part icy draughts of air were constantly circling about, and that to avoid dangerous consequences it was necessary to be clothed in the style of a Canadian in mid-winter.

The interior of this home of dramatic art, was, if such a thing could be, even more dismal and dispiriting than the exterior. One could see with half an eye that it had originally been designed for a very different purpose from the one to which it was now devoted. Indeed, notwithstanding the transformation it had undergone, it bore a suspicious resemblance to a disused chapel. Along the sides, and across the end facing the stage, was a gallery ; and the middle portion of this gallery, shielded from the vulgar gaze by papered partitions, was the select part of the house. This was furnished with damaged cane-bottomed chairs, while the frequenters of the side galleries and the pit were only accommodated with rough benches without backs. The stage itself was small, and all its appointments were too evidently the prey of mildew and shabbiness.

Charlotte for some minutes was the sole

occupant of the dress circle, but at length her loneliness was relieved by the appearance of a girl of about fourteen summers, who, she learned afterwards, was a daughter of Mr. Larpont and his spouse. Later in the evening half a score of people wandered into the gallery, some of whom, finding the scene too depressing to be endured even under the name of amusement, withdrew. There were not more than forty misguided individuals in the pit when two men appeared in a little pen in front of the stage and began tuning their violins. An excruciating five minutes of screeching and screaming from these instruments of torture was brought to an end by the ringing of a bell and the rising of the curtain upon the first scene of *The Impress of the Blood-stained Hand*.

We will spare our readers a detailed account of the horrors which for the next hour were portrayed, and in which Mr. Evering-

ton, Mr. Larpont, and other equally eminent personages took part. In vain did the irresistible Perkerville essay to enliven the general gloom. For once he proved to be resistible ; and those scenes of a lighter hue, devised to lessen the strain, or by contrast to heighten the effect of the sanguinary tragedy, as well as to give time for the setting of fresh scenery in the deeper recesses of the stage, hardly evoked a laugh. His pliant fingers performed their accustomed snaky movements in vain ; and when he looked at Charlotte, after his best bits of "business," it was with a gaze which seemed to piteously implore a smile. It was only in the last scene, when Mr. Larpont (the villain) died, while Mr. Everington (the wronged but innocent lover) stood over him sawing the air with an old cutlass, which he had referred to as his "bright rapier," and holding the hand of Mrs. Larpont, who, he said, was his own for ever, and who would,

in consequence, live in bliss within his castle walls ; it was only in this scene that any manifestation of popular feeling occurred. Incited thereunto by the remembrance that this was his benefit, and that a lovely woman was a witness of his doings, Mr. Larpont, perhaps unduly, prolonged the agonies of his decease, glancing at Charlotte, in the midst of his throes, to ascertain what effect this particularly fine death was making upon her. Perceiving these glances and losing patience in consequence, a youthful supporter of the drama in the pit exclaimed, in a tone of disgust, "Get on wi' thy dyin', man, an' don't look about so much." A few faint cries of "Hear, hear" followed this adjuration ; and Mr. Larpont, thus warned, hastily breathed his last, and the curtain fell.

The *pas seul*, to which Mr. Perkerville had referred as one of the delights of the evening, followed, and was executed by a

young lady in very scanty skirts and soiled tights, who had appeared as a countess in the previous piece. As soon as she had retired the great tragedian, who had been waiting at the wings, strode into view to make his speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I thank you for coming to my benefit; and I trust you are satisfied with our exertions for your edification, and, if I may say so, for your amusement.” Here he looked severely at the boy who had been bold enough to give him a hint respecting his dying a few minutes before, and the limited audience cheered him by a faint expression of approval. “You are very ke-ind,” he continued with a gloomy frown, “and I thank you from the bottom of my soul. There are not many of you—I could have wished there had been more—but I can’t blame them that has come for them that hasn’t, and therefore thanking you again for your

patronage—thanking you again for your patronage”—here Mr. Larpont seemed to lose his head, and began backing towards the wing—“again thanking you for your patronage,” he repeated; and with these words and an awkward bow backed out of sight.

The audience were not prepared for such a sudden conclusion, and a moment's silent pause occurred before they remembered their duty and accorded to the beneficiare the applause which to the actor is as the breath of life. At length a few clapped their hands; Mr. Larpont reappeared and bowed; the rest clapped in order to relieve the tedium; and while the two fiddles again lacerated the air the greater part of the male occupants of the pit lit their pipes, and thus fortified themselves for *The Perils of the Burning Lime Kiln*.

Young, inexperienced, prone to idealize as Charlotte was, determined as she was at this

particular time to look on the bright side, she could not hide from herself that all this was a very poor and miserable affair. The obtrusive squalor of all the stage appointments, no less than of that part of the house devoted to the audience, the absence of all grace and dignity from the piece which she had witnessed, and the conspicuous coarseness of all who had ranted and raved through its scenes, laid a heavy weight upon her heart. Anything so utterly wretched she could not have conceived. The more superfine of the Millvale people, among whom her mother was a leader, had been in the habit of drawing comparisons between the theatre of their native town and the great homes of dramatic art in the metropolis, and she had unconsciously imbibed the idea that no other place of the kind could be more defective. And yet there, on the rare occasions on which her father and mother had permitted her to taste its de-

lights, she had been able to forget the surroundings and the personalities of the performers, and to yield her imagination captive to the illusions of the stage. What was lacking in the representation her fancy and feeling had supplied. And, notwithstanding the depreciatory criticism with which she was familiar, the management in Millvale, for a second-rate provincial town, was respectable and effective ; and on the occasions when she might have seen something more nearly approaching the Castlefield level—why, she had not happened to be present. Her expectation was to find any other theatre at least equal to that of Millvale ; but now she found that it was far from being the lowest deep. Undoubtedly her engagement with Mr. Everington made her more fully alive to faults than she would otherwise have been, and she began to think that Mrs. Everington had not warned her without just cause. But in leaving her

home and in signing the agreement she had committed herself beyond recall ; and she must bear up through the month for which she was pledged as bravely as she could. However much her susceptibilities might be shocked, a month was not a long time. Even the month was not to be spent in Castlefield ; and before its expiration a change might come over Everington's affairs and over her own. At the worst she would be gaining some technical knowledge ; and perhaps in a larger town her connection with Everington would be the means of procuring a better introduction.

Revolving these considerations in her mind, she left the theatre before *The Perils of the Burning Lime Kiln* were displayed ; and what those perils were she never knew. She was sadly distressed and perplexed, and the truth began to dawn upon her that earning one's bread and making one's way in the world are not such easy and simple

processes as they often seem to people who have never tried either the one or the other. It was a new and not an agreeable thing to her to be out alone in a strange town at such an hour of the night, and suggested possible incidents in the life which she had chosen which before she had not contemplated.

On the morning following the Larpont benefit she arrived at the stage door at the appointed time, and found Mr. Larpont and Mr. Perkerville in close conference on the dark landing. The comedian raised his hat and bowed, and the tragedian, after regarding her with a fixed stare for half a minute, did the same.

"You found Mr. Everington yesterday, I hope, marm?" said Mr. Perkerville.

"Yes, without any difficulty, thank you," returned Charlotte.

"And we have found him," muttered Mr. Larpont, in a loud aside—"found him out!"

"I hear, marm," said the comedian, "that you aspire to the stage—that you have, in fact, become one of us. May I take the liberty of asking if this is the truth?"

"One of us!" One of a set of people who shocked all her susceptibilities by every word they spoke, even by their very appearance!—people compared with whom her father's footman was a gentleman!

"Yes," she replied, hiding her feeling of keen humiliation as well as she could.

"Permit me, marm, to present you to Mr. Larpont, whose fine performance you witnessed last night—a rare privilege, marm, a rare privilege!"

"I fear the performance palled upon you, as you did not sit it through; and I do not wonder if it did," said Larpont, with a stately bow. "What can one do if he is not supported? With such colleagues as Everington provides—excepting Perkerville,

the irresistible, the comic, at whose infinite humour the muse of Tragedy herself might smile—what can one do? An unpropitious fate may grind even genius in the dust.”

“Certainly,” said Charlotte, not knowing what else to say. “May I go in?”

“Allow me to precede you,” said Mr. Larpont. “The stairs are dark, but I will open the door above.”

With this remark Mr. Larpont ushered Charlotte into the small apartment containing the mouldy smell, known to its frequenters as the green-room. Here seven or eight people were talking angrily, but as soon as Charlotte appeared their conversation ceased. Every eye was turned upon her, and she sat, in the chair which Mr. Larpont brought, with the very uncomfortable consciousness that she was the observed of all observers. Their curiosity satisfied, the interrupted conversation was resumed, but in tones so low that Charlotte only

caught a word now and then. From the stray words she did catch, however, she gathered that they were discussing some grievance, and from the frequent recurrence of Everington's name she concluded that he was the person who had raised their resentment. She was able to identify every one of the shabby and hungry-looking group—from the young man who sat gnawing the handle of a cane down to the woman who had danced the *pas seul*—with the characters of the previous night; and though she shrank from any association with them, she could not but pity them, on account of the want and poverty which were painfully apparent in every case.

Larpont and Perkerville remained in the green-room after Charlotte's arrival, and would have entered into conversation with her but for the reserve of her manner, which kept them at a distance. After scowling at himself in the dingy mirror several times,

Mr. Larpont joined in the conversation of his fellow-artistes, and Perkerville followed his example. The talk suddenly came to an end, and all the talkers rose to their feet at the sound of Mr. Everington's step on the stair.

"Good morning, Miss Wharton; glad to see you here," said that gentleman. "Larpont, how's this?" he added, in affected surprise, as he looked at the company standing in a cluster; Larpont, with folded arms, being in front, like a champion ready to perish rather than let evil come to those who have put their trust in him. "How's this, I say? Why has not rehearsal begun?"

"Can you not guess?" asked the tragedian, with a solemn air.

"I'm not in a humour for guessing," retorted the manager. "Stop this fooling, and go to work."

"Fooling, indeed!" cried Mrs. Larpont, speaking over her husband's shoulder.

"We'll fooling you before we've done. We'll see who's fooling here."

"Peace, woman, peace! I think I was appointed to speak to this man."

"Right, old fellow, right," exclaimed Perkerville approvingly. "Let him have it."

"Say what you have to say, and have done with it," said Everington, with a sneer.

"Sir," said Larpont, with an oratorical flourish of his hand, "we cannot live on air. We are artists, sir, and love our art, but we have landladies who clamour for their rent, and neither butcher, nor baker, nor candlestick-maker, if I may be permitted to quote the words of a juvenile poem with which some of us were familiar in the halcyon days of youth, neither the one nor the other of these tradesmen will supply our necessities without an adequate return."

Here Mr. Larpont paused, partly for want of breath, partly to observe the effect

of his words upon the person addressed, and upon the people for whom he spoke.

“Well,” returned Mr. Everington, with assumed indifference, “did you ever think they would?”

“Sir, perceive you not my drift?” said Larpont, raising his voice.

“I can’t say that I do.”

Some of the group at Mr. Larpont’s back were goaded beyond the point of silent endurance by these words, and exclamations of indignation and muttered epithets of no complimentary character were freely uttered. Commanding silence by a majestic gesture, the tragedian continued—

“Then, sir, though I could have wished to spare you in the presence of a fair stranger, I must be more explicit. We want some money.”

“That’s not an uncommon complaint,” retorted Everington, “and it’s one that I am suffering from myself. And now that

you have had your say will you go to work?"

"I won't," cried Perkerville, emphatically.

"Nor I," exclaimed the lady who had worn the tights.


"I'm d—d if I do," chimed in the melancholy young man with the cane.

"I've only had five shillings for the last fortnight," wailed the "second walking lady."

"An' I've only had six an' three," put in Mr. Perkerville, making noises with his fingers like the successive reports of a November cracker.

"An' me an' Larpont's only had twelve an' six, and three children besides ourselves to keep," complained the tragedian's lady. "I'll twelve an' six him," she added under her breath.

Each one of the company expressed a similar resolve to that of Mr. Perkerville, and uttered a similar complaint to that of



the persons who had spoken of the paucity of their receipts ; and as they all talked at once and in a most angry manner, a man with less effrontery than Everington possessed would have been overwhelmed. This, however, was not the first time he had had to deal with a mutinous company, and as he had been expecting an outbreak of the kind, he was not altogether unprepared to deal with it. He looked at them with a mocking smile, and was about to reply when Larpont, finding there was an opportunity of making himself heard, again waved his hand and resumed his functions as spokesman.

“Our distress seems to touch you not,” he said, “though you know that all we say is true. We had begun to fear that your heart was flint, and now our fears are justified. Hear, then, our resolve ! We play no more until our salaries are paid.”

This speech, delivered in Mr. Larpont’s most impressive style, in which the rolling

of every letter "r" was an important element, elicited from the company marked expressions of approval and assent. Its effect on Everington was not so great.

"It's no use mouthing at me," he retorted. "That sort of rot won't go down here. Just be sensible for five minutes, if you can. I'm as badly off as any of you."

He was interrupted by a chorus of incredulous voices, but only one made itself distinctly heard above the general murmur of dissent—that of the young man with the cane, who apparently had also a habit of emphasizing his remarks by the employment of objectionable adjectives. This young man characterized Mr. Everington's last statement as a "d—d lie."

"I'm as badly off as any of you," reiterated the manager, in a louder tone.

"Who received the money last night?" asked Mr. Larpont.

"A fine lot there was to receive," said



Everington ; “not two pounds in the whole house. It shows what the public think of *you* when they give you such a benefit as that.”

“He adds insult to injury, ladies and gentlemen !” cried the tragedian. “But we will not condescend to reply to such unworthy taunts ; and again I ask him, much or little, who received it ?”

“Who pays for rent and gas ? Who has to hand cash to the printer before he’ll print the bills, and to the bill-sticker before he’ll post ’em, eh ?”

“That’s not our business,” put in Perker-ville. “We want our salaries.”

“And how am I to pay them if you shut the theatre up ?” asked Everington.

“You pay them not when the theatre is open,” said Mr. Larpont.

“Well, go to work for another day or two, and I’ll do my best to satisfy you.”

“No more work without wages. We

may as well starve like d—d idle gentlemen if we starve at all,” cried the young man with the cane.

“Our decision is ir-r-revocable,” said Larpont.

Mr. Everington was forced to admit to himself that there was no prospect of inducing his refractory company to fall in with his wishes by any arguments or persuasions at his command; and he silently came to the conclusion that his little enterprise in Castlefield was at an end. He had hoped that the crisis would have been postponed for a few days, and that by Charlotte's appearance his exhausted treasury would have been sufficiently replenished to enable him to keep his people with him until he was well enough furnished to leave them comfortably—to himself—in the lurch. These hopes he must now relinquish; and, being a man of prompt decision, he determined upon his course without delay.

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He had some personal properties in the theatre which might be of use to him at a future time. To secure these he must have a clear field ; and then, with his properties and the balance of the receipts which he held, he could shake the dust of Castlefield off his feet, leaving the townspeople to whom he owed money, as well as the members of his company, to regret his unavoidable absence.

“ Won’t you play one night ? ”

“ Not one,” was the answer from half a dozen different throats.

“ Well now, you don’t deserve it, but I’ll tell you what I’ll do with you. You don’t expect I carry enough money about me to satisfy such a crowd of sharks ; but I’ll try if I can get you something by three o’clock this afternoon. Will that satisfy you ? ”

Some of the women began to cry, actually touched in their misery by what seemed to them a generous offer. The men were

harder of belief; but as there was nothing better to be done they agreed to disperse for the present, to return in the afternoon, and if any money were paid to rehearse the piece selected for the evening's performance. When the last of the poor creatures had left the green-room, Mr. Everington turned to Charlotte.

"I am sorry, Miss Wharton," he said, "that you have witnessed such a disagreeable incident at the outset of your career. It may convey a wrong impression. But, if I may so express myself, an actor's life is full of vicissitudes."

"Is what these poor people allege true, sir?" she asked, indignantly.

"Partly, partly," he answered lightly. "They are given to exaggeration, and get excited, so that it's not quite so bad as it seems. But I told you we'd been down on our luck lately. However, I shall make it all right with them this afternoon, though I

shall have to part with some of my valuables to do so. Allow me to say good morning, Miss Wharton. As soon as I have got this business settled I will let you know ; and I hope, in the mean time, you will not permit what you have heard to prejudice your mind. You are at the Brudneth Arms, I think ? I will send a message to you there."

Charlotte was too much incensed to trust herself with any further speech, and, in addition, she was wishful to overtake some of the people, who, she feared, were in sore need. She left Mr. Everington bowing at the top of the dark staircase, and hurried into the market-place. At no great distance she saw the persons she wanted sauntering along in the aimless and dejected manner of men and women who are crushed in spirit and who have nothing to do but to wait, with only a faint hope of gaining any good even by waiting.

Mrs. Larpont and the "second walking

lady" were lingering in the rear of the rest. Touching Mrs. Larpont gently on the shoulder, Charlotte said—

"You will excuse me if, after what I have just heard, I ask you to consider me as a friend."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Larpont, wearily.


"And you will not be offended if I venture to use a friend's privilege?"

Charlotte produced her purse and took out two sovereigns, and put them into Mrs. Larpont's hand.

"For your children," she said. "You can pay me back when you are better off."

"God bless——" The rest of this benediction was choked with sobs; but Mrs. Larpont retained Charlotte's hand until she regained her voice. "There are others as badly off as us. May I share them with Miss Miller and Miss Pardoe?"


"If you like—yes, I should be glad for you to do that." And Charlotte turned



and walked hurriedly away, while Mrs. Larpont, quivering with joy, showed her treasure to her husband and his companions.

Though anxious to know how events were progressing at the theatre, Charlotte did not go out again that day. Late in the evening the servant brought a letter to her room. As she opened it an enclosure fell into her lap.

“Miss Wharton,”— she read, “It is not the place of a wife, however thoroughly she knows her husband to be a base, bad man, to denounce him to a stranger, except under the extremest necessity. If I had not thought of this I should have said more to you than I did when I saw you last. But, as you will bear in mind, I warned you as fully as I could. You disregarded my warning and took your own course. Before now, however, you will have found that my warning was not without justification. Fortunately, you are not much injured. I



should not have troubled to write to you but that I liked you when I saw you, and that I have accidentally heard of your kindness to our poor people. I hardly know what I am saying, and doubt whether I shall make myself understood. But my husband is leaving Castlefield—leaving the people all unpaid—and I dare not let him know that I am sending this line to you. You will probably never see us more. But don't judge other actors by us. I enclose you an introduction to a gentleman—a *gentleman*—whom I knew years ago, and who, I think, will be glad to receive a line from me. He may put you in the way of fulfilling your wish if you still persist in going upon the stage. Think of me kindly if you can.


“ELIZABETH EVERINGTON.”

The enclosure was addressed—“Edgar Gordon, Esq., Theatre Royal, Ferringham.”

CHAPTER IV.

A FAIR PROSPECT AND A POSTPONEMENT.

MR. EVERINGTON'S precipitate departure from Castlefield set Charlotte free from the unpleasant consequences of the engagement into which she had rashly entered with that worthy man. Her first feeling was one of great relief when she found that all connection between them was really at an end. But on the other hand there was a sense of disappointment that her first attempt to place her foot on the ladder leading to fame and money, or, at least, to a useful life, had ended in such signal failure. Still, it was something—it was much—to her to know that she was no longer on a footing of




fellowship and equality with Perkerville, Larpont, and the rest. For, however deep her pity for their sufferings and her indignation at their wrongs, she could not contemplate constant association and co-operation with them without a shudder.

In the midst of her perplexity she did not forget that she owed a debt of gratitude to Mrs. Everington for her thoughtful kindness. That the manager's wife should have remembered her in the midst of her own trouble Charlotte felt to be an indication of sincere goodness of heart : and as she had really no plan of action suitable to the present contingency, she determined to adopt Mrs. Everington's recommendation, and seek out Mr. Edgar Gordon in Ferringham. And as there was nothing to be gained by remaining in Castlefield, she further determined to make the new venture as early as possible ; and, by the following mid-day, she had left Castlefield far behind, and was

threading her way through the busy streets of a great Midland town.

As a result of her inquiries she learned that Mr. Gordon lived in a suburb, and she drove to the address given her without delay. Fortunately he was at home; and, after showing her into a well-appointed drawing-room, the servant returned to say that he would be with her in a few moments. Charlotte had sent in Mrs. Everington's note with her own card; and waited anxiously for Mr. Gordon's appearance, wondering whether he would prove as great a dis-illusion as Mr. Everington had done, or whether she was now about to come face to face with a man who would approach her ideal.

It is said that a man's character may be inferred from the clothes he wears and from the style of the rooms he inhabits. With some indistinct idea of this sort, Charlotte looked around, and what she saw encouraged her to hope that at least she would have to



deal with a person of refinement and taste, and one who also had some enthusiasm for his own particular art. Quiet colours prevailed everywhere. The furniture was chiefly of dark old rosewood, and the walls were lined with choice engravings, the subjects being almost entirely Shaksperian. Before she had had time to note further particulars the door opened and Mr. Gordon entered.

Her first glance laid her fears to rest. Mr. Gordon was middle-aged, above the medium height, with a broad chest, dark hair, thin upon the top of the head, a close-shaven face, and full deep-blue eyes. The indefinable grace which grows from mental activity, rightly directed, and from familiarity with noble thoughts, rendered the somewhat sharp features pleasing even to one who could not account for the agreeable impression; while his dress, faultless in every particular, was as great a contrast as

possible to the slipshod vulgarity of Everington.

With grave politeness he bowed her to a seat, and after a few commonplace remarks, referring to the letter which he held in his hand, he said—

“So you know Ethel de Sayne, as she used to be called? How is she looking now? She was very handsome at one time; but I am afraid she made a sad mistake in marrying that Everington. She might have done far better, but there is no controlling a girl’s fancies.”

“She is very handsome still,” replied Charlotte, “but her husband is certainly not worthy of her, and I fear she is not so happy as she deserves to be.”

“Poor Ethel! Her father was one of my oldest friends, and was very proud of his daughter. She came out under my care, and might have done well but for that unfortunate marriage. She says they are

leaving Castlefield. They have not done much good there, I suppose ?”

“No, indeed ! Mr. Everington has behaved most cruelly and dishonourably. His conscience must be quite worn out, if he ever had one. He has run away and left all the people unpaid and in the greatest distress.”

“The scoundrel ! But it’s just what I should have expected of him. It is men of his stamp who bring discredit on the profession—men with not the least love for their art, or pride in it—men who make it but a means of money-getting—men who debase the stage by pandering to the lowest taste ; and who in private life and conduct so behave as to make the very name of actor a byword and a shame ! Excuse me, Miss Wharton, but when I think of such individuals I almost lose my self-control.”

“There is no need to apologize,” returned Charlotte, her eyes flashing with sympathy.

thetic indignation. "No honourable man or woman could think of such conduct without abhorrence."

"And poor Ethel is tied to him for life ! It will be the usual story, I suppose. He will drag her from town to town; trading on her good looks as long as they last, subjecting her to every kind of humiliation, letting her feel the sharpness of poverty and the bitterness of disgrace, and then, perhaps, at last, when her life is wasted and wrecked, leaving her to her fate. Poor Ethel ! It is well her father cannot know all this."

Mr. Gordon fell into a reverie, thinking of his old friend and the child of former years. While his thoughts were busily employed contrasting the hopes and promises of the past with the realities of the present, Charlotte was congratulating herself upon having met with one so perfectly after her own heart, and wondering, somewhat fearfully, whether he would consider her fit to enter

upon that calling which he evidently regarded with such reverence, and whether he would be willing to give her the opportunity she desired.

"I must beg your pardon, Miss Wharton," said Mr. Gordon, returning to the business before him. "You did not come to hear about Ethel or her father, but to talk about yourself. Mrs. Everington tells me you wish for an engagement?"

"Yes, very much."

"If it were in my power to offer you one I should wish to know something of your capacities, and should ask you many more questions than I shall do at the present time. I ought to tell you at once, however, that it is quite out of my power to offer you anything that you could accept for three months at least."

"Oh, sir," exclaimed Charlotte, "do not disappoint me so bitterly. I am willing to make a very low beginning, and I have

money enough to keep me from want for some time. Do try to make an opening for me."

"As a fairy in the pantomime, for instance?" said Mr. Gordon, with a smile.

"The pantomime? I never thought of that."

"No; I guessed as much, and, I presume, Mrs. Everington also forgot it. But you see we are within a very short time of Christmas, and, whatever one may think of pantomimes in the abstract, we are bound to produce one at this season of the year. Ours is now in active preparation. How long it will run after Christmas I cannot say—for a good many weeks, no doubt, and until it is out of the way, there will, of course, be nothing to be done which you would undertake."

"And such will be the case everywhere, I suppose," said Charlotte.

"In every theatre that you ought to think of appearing in. You have chosen a most

unfortunate season, and I am afraid you cannot do better than wait for a few weeks. If you cannot wait I should be at a loss to advise you."

"But I can wait, and shall be very glad to do so, if you will give me a trial on the first opportunity. May I hope for so much?"

"Yes; I will venture to promise that, for poor Ethel's sake. In the mean time, will you remain in Ferringham?"


"Oh, thank you, Mr. Gordon," cried Charlotte. "Yes; I think I shall take lodgings here."

"Do you know any one in the town?"

"No one."

"Ah, you will find waiting in a strange town rather dull work. May I ask you to accept an order for the theatre? If you will excuse me for a few moments I will write the order, and ascertain if Mrs. Gordon is at liberty."

At last her desires seemed to be in a fair way to be fulfilled. The long period of inaction which seemed inevitable was unpleasant to look forward to for more reasons than one. She had provided herself with what she hoped would be an ample supply of money, until she should begin to receive her own earnings; but her calculations on this head were quite thrown out by this prospective delay. With rigid economy, however, and by disposing of some of her jewelry, she would be able to maintain herself. This was the most pressing and palpable reason for looking upon the delay as unpleasant. But she was also impatient to make a commencement with the work she had chosen—which had been a dream to her for years, and in which she would seek the redemption of her life from the narrow restraints, the conventional aimlessness, the wasteful inefficiency, which she had learnt to dread, and which seemed to her the



characteristics of the existence of too many women of her own station. Valuing the work as she did, every day that intervened between the present and the time she would enter upon it, appeared at first sight to be thrown away. But her high estimate of the actress's vocation was in fact an antidote as well as a cause of impatience. Though at first sight it might appear that these weeks or months would be lost, it only required a second thought to show her that if such were the case, it would be entirely her own fault. The whole interval at her disposal might be profitably employed in preparations which she ought to make and studies in which she ought to engage; and if Mr. Gordon would only advise her as to these she would be less unfit when the time came than she was painfully conscious of being now.

She had reached this point in her reflections when Mr. Gordon returned, preceded by his wife.

"Mrs. Gordon," he said, "has a far better head for business than I have——"

"I need to have, Miss Wharton," put in the lady thus complimented; "for Mr. Gordon is so much taken up with his studies, and so apt to look at affairs from what he calls the artistic side, that he needs some one at his elbow who is a trifle more practical."

"Well," said Mr. Gordon, laughing at his wife's remark, "I was about to say, Miss Wharton, that Mrs. Gordon will be able to give you a good deal of information which I could not give. She will tell you all about lodgings, and dresses, and so on."

"I shall be greatly obliged if she will take the trouble," said Charlotte.

"And here is the order; don't be afraid to use it as often as you please."

"Thank you. May I ask if you will advise me as to what studies would be most useful? I should like to make a wise use of the time at my disposal."

“I shall be very glad to give you the best counsel I can. But we’ll not go into that subject now; when you are quietly settled down we can consider it thoroughly. For the present I shall leave you in my wife’s hands, and I could not leave you in better.”


The first topic on which Mrs. Gordon brought her practical qualities to bear was the important one of lodgings; and she ended a brief discussion on this point by putting on her bonnet and accompanying Charlotte to the house of a respectable widow with whom she was acquainted, and who let furnished apartments. The rooms were vacant; Charlotte was satisfied with them and with the terms, the bargain between her and the landlady was completed, and she at once took possession.

“You will have many things to do and to think of this afternoon,” said Mrs. Gordon, when this business was finished, “and we need not trouble about anything else to-day.

We dine at five, and if you will come in early to-morrow we can have a quiet chat before dinner, and afterwards you can go down to the theatre with us."

Charlotte acknowledged Mrs. Gordon's kindness, and accepted the invitation; and Mrs. Gordon, who was in fact as practical as her husband had described her, hurried off.

Now that she had a definite prospect before her and a settled abode, one of Charlotte's first cares was to write a long letter to Miss Crimpton, detailing her adventures and experiences since leaving Millvale, and informing the little milliner where communications would reach her for the future. In this letter she enclosed another, addressed to her father, in which she told him that she was well and that she hoped shortly to be able to say that she was engaged in useful and honourable work. She promised to write to him at frequent intervals, and much regretted that she could



not hear from him without betraying her whereabouts. She requested Miss Crimpton to post this second epistle in Millvale, so that the postmark would not be any clue; and she again urged that little lady to be sure and give her any obtainable scraps of information respecting her family.

Next day she duly presented herself at Mrs. Gordon's, and had a confidential consultation with her hostess. The first point raised was that of a professional name, and after due deliberation the two ladies, subject to Mr. Gordon's approval, selected the name of Mabel Morechester. Then there were dresses to be provided, and as her funds were not great, all the greater care was needed in respect to their expenditure. In this particular Mrs. Gordon's "business head" proved itself worthy of the highest praise; and before the interview was ended Charlotte expressed her belief that she had at last found some one who had discovered

the great secret of making sixpence go as far as eighteen pence.

And the theatre—what a contrast to the cold, damp, dingy barn at Castlefield ! Here was a spacious stage, and brilliant lights, and good music, and a well-filled auditorium ; the piece was a sterling old comedy ; and if there was no genius among those who took part in its representation, there were, on the other hand, evidences of intelligence and of careful training and an utter absence of the impotent swagger and the coarse vulgarities which she had lately witnessed. As she sat in the box where Mrs. Gordon left her it seemed as if both Castlefield and Ferringham were parts of a dream, from which she would presently wake. It was almost too good to be true that she should have reasonable ground for looking forward to taking her place on that stage at no distant day—that she should be justified in hoping, if the power were in her,

and she did not greatly doubt that it was—that she would move and melt an audience similar to the one collected around her now—that she would be interpreting some great master's thought, giving life and breath to the creature of a poet's vision !

Mr. Gordon proved to be more than equal to his promise. He not only helped her in the direction of her private studies, but he gave her lessons of the highest value. In her he had a pupil after his own heart. Gifted with sufficient personal beauty to command admiration, with a voice capable of great expression, with intelligence to understand and appreciate the lights and shadows of a character, and with an imagination so vivid as to enable her to lose her individuality in the aims and motives of a fictitious personage, he saw in her a scholar worthy of care and pains. It would be an infinite pity if such splendid natural endowments should come to naught for lack of the


technical training which he could give ; and so, with mutual pleasure and with increasing mutual admiration and respect, teacher and scholar pursued their congenial task. The idea that her days would be wasted until she could begin to act entirely vanished ; and every day that came and went left her more thankful that she had been forced to enter upon this happy probation.

She was also allowed to go, in company with Mrs. Gordon, behind the scenes. This was when the pantomime had been running for a week, Mr. Gordon, for good reasons, not having wished her to go before. What a marvellous sight it was ! The elaborate machinery, the crowds of carpenters and scene-shifters, of imps, fairies, and other *dramatis personæ* of that children's delight—a Christmas pantomime. It was rather a shock to her to learn that, in that commonplace life which is passed away from the glare of the footlights, the demon-king was

no other than the husband—and a rather henpecked husband—of the fairy queen; and that notwithstanding their implacable hostility now, when the lights were put out they would trudge off to their lodging arm in arm and sit down together to a supper of tripe and onions. It was rather startling, too, to see, upon turning one's head, the clown standing at one's elbow, eating voice lozenges with a melancholy expression, and to recognize in him the very individual who, only a few moments before, had been rating a careless ballet-girl for some trifling fault; and it was very startling when, pulling himself together, he bounded on to the stage with a whoop, which set all the children screaming with delight. But the most wonderful sight of all was the audience, crowding the building from the basement to the roof. Never before had she seen such closely packed masses of human beings. The pit was a sea of faces, all of them

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stretched to their utmost capacity of wonder, of admiration, of laughter, according to the changes upon the stage ; all, excepting one old man and woman, sitting in the middle of the second row, who stolidly ate apples through the entire performance. The dress circle and the upper circle were full, though not so densely crowded ; and in these parts of the house large shirt fronts, brilliant-coloured dresses, and laughing children's faces were the most conspicuous objects. Above them, seeming far away and indistinct, was the gallery, the fortunate few who had come early and secured front places resting arms and chins upon the parapet, while behind them, stretching far away up to the roof, where there seemed to be hardly room for any one to stand erect, was a hot, noisy, good-humoured throng. And when, while her attention was quite withdrawn from what was passing on the stage, the whole vast concourse laughed or clapped



their myriad hands it was indeed a sight wonderful to see, and one which Charlotte was not likely to forget.

The pantomime was a great success, and it was not likely to be withdrawn so long as it attracted such paying numbers. But at the end of January Mr. Gordon fixed the date for its withdrawal, and announced his intention of producing *Romeo and Juliet* upon the reopening of the theatre.

“And you, Miss Morechester,” he said, one day as they sat at dinner, “shall play ‘Juliet.’”

“‘Juliet!’” exclaimed Charlotte and Mrs. Gordon in the same breath.

“‘Juliet,’ my dear,” said Mr. Gordon, decisively. “And why not, may I ask?”

“You know that Shakspeare never pays,” returned his practical spouse.

“Then we’ll play it for our own gratification for once. We may do that, I hope?”

“But do you think I am competent to

take such a character?" said Charlotte.
"I thought I was to begin low down in the scale, and go higher by degrees."

"I think it is Milton, Miss Morechester, who somewhere speaks of somebody—

‘——Till by degrees of merit raised,
They open to themselves the way
Up hither under long obedience tried;’

and no doubt the principle is good in the abstract. But I don't intend you to act upon it. You'll do the thing splendidly, I am sure. This may be a fancy of mine, but I want you to have a fair chance to begin with, and I shall most certainly cast you for 'Juliet.' And you must screw your courage to the sticking-point, and you'll not fail."

So it was decided that on the 1st of March the Theatre Royal, Ferringham, was to be reopened, and that Miss Mabel Morechester was on that night to make her *début* as "Juliet."

It was with much anxiety and many misgivings that Charlotte went to the study of the part. The opportunity it offered surpassed all her hopes, and she put her whole heart, and mind, and soul into the preliminary work. When she called the crowded theatre to mind, and reflected upon how much would depend upon her, she was inclined to despair ; but again, perhaps kindled by a word of encouragement from Mr. Gordon, her enthusiasm would light up and she would bend her whole powers to the task.

Burns has a well-known remark anent “the best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men ;” and we suppose the observation will hold good of the schemes of women as well as of the lords of creation and rodents. However this may be in general, in Charlotte’s case the observation found a fresh exemplification.

Up to the middle of February the news she had received from Miss Crimpton of her

friends in Millvale had been meagre, but what there was of it was sufficiently reassuring. No change of any moment had taken place so far as she was aware, and she was therefore both surprised and alarmed to find on her table on the morning of the fourteenth, instead of a valentine, this note:—

“DEAR MISS WHARTON,

“I hear that something dreadful has happened to your father, though what it is I cannot rightly learn. Some say he has had a stroke, and others say that he has lost all his money. I think people have got the idea that it is a stroke from somebody saying it is a heavy blow. Anyway, you ought to be at home, and so I am, in haste, yours truly to command,

“JESSIE CRIMPTON.”

There could be no question as to what was her duty after the receipt of such a

communication. Miss Crimpton's letter was just sufficiently explicit to alarm, and far from sufficiently explicit to satisfy the wish for exact knowledge of the state of the case. It did not pretend, indeed, to be more than a reproduction of the rumours which were current in Millvale, and Charlotte's distress was aggravated by the uncertainty under which she laboured. A suspicion, too, so strong as to amount very nearly to a conviction, took possession of her mind—a suspicion that in leaving her home and in allowing her parents to remain in ignorance as to where she was living and what she was doing she had committed a breach of filial duty, and been guilty of a piece of obstinate selfishness. If the worst were true, and her father were stricken with paralysis, it might be that she was the cause. And then, as a set-off against this self-reproachful thought, came the remembrance of Henderson, and of her parent's impor-

tunity with regard to her marriage, from which there appeared to be but one means of escape ; and whatever the consequences which had already fallen or might follow, whatever sorrow might come to her or to others, it seemed as if she could not have acted otherwise than as she had acted. Abandoning, therefore, all attempt to pass a verdict upon her conduct, and knowing that any just verdict would take account of motives as well as of results, she set herself to perform the duty which was before her ; and the first step to take was to explain the state of affairs to Mr. Gordon.

“ Ah, Miss Morechester, you are an early bird this morning,” said that gentleman, when she was shown into his study. “ Is ‘ Juliet ’ troubling you ? ”

“ I have bad news from home,” she replied shortly. “ Will you read this letter ? ”

“ This is very bad. What do you propose to do ? ”

"There is but one thing I can do. I must return to Millvale immediately."

"And, of course, you cannot tell when you can come back to Ferringham."

"If the worst is true," said Charlotte, speaking with a lump in her throat, "I must stay at home. And, indeed, I do not think they would permit me to come back. As I have explained to you, they have no sympathy with my aspirations—do not understand them; and would strongly object to my taking to the stage."

"It will be a great disappointment to me, very great," said Mr. Gordon. "But I see the difficulties of the case; and your first duty is to your parents."

"I am very sorry that your trouble has been thrown away," Charlotte said, regretfully.

"It may not have been thrown away. I will put something else up in the place of *Romeo and Juliet*. Fortunately no public

announcement has yet been made, and you may come back to play 'Juliet' after all."

Charlotte shook her head doubtfully.

"You will pardon me, Miss Morechester—or, as I ought to say now, Miss Wharton—if I venture on a word of advice. Suppose that you discover that the evil has been exaggerated, and that there is no absolute need for your presence at home, would it not be wise and right to be perfectly frank with your father and mother? If you were to tell them all that has passed since you left home, would not they sanction your following the calling for which you are so eminently fitted?"

"I fear not—in fact, I am certain they would not. But I will write to you when I reach home and know the truth. But whatever the future has in store, I shall never cease to be grateful to you and Mrs. Gordon for the treatment I have received at your hands."

Upon being consulted, Mrs. Gordon agreed with her husband and Charlotte that it was the clear duty of the latter to hasten to Millvale as quickly as possible ; and like a good, practical soul, she accompanied her friend to her lodgings, arranged business details with the landlady while Charlotte was preparing for the journey, and then saw her off at the station.

CHAPTER V.

A WELCOME HOME.

A QUICK railway train, whirling through busy towns, clattering over viaducts, boring through tunnels, plunging into dim stations, pausing a moment alongside platforms where confusion apparently reigns supreme, or even gliding along with comparative smoothness through level fields, is not the best place for any one to select who wishes for a spell of quiet meditation. To say nothing of the distraction of mind resulting from the rapidly changing scene, or from the getting in and out of passengers at the stopping-places, there are usually one or two people in each compartment who are disposed to talk, and

who will insist upon giving the company the benefit of their opinions on things in general, or upon entering at some length into a disquisition concerning their own affairs in particular.

But Charlotte's mind was too seriously burdened for even such incidental distractions to greatly interfere with the course of her meditations. She did not attempt to disguise the fact that in returning home she was relinquishing the hopes which had seemed so near to their fulfilment. She was going back to the narrow sphere in which her life had hitherto moved—to its contracted hopes, its low aspirations, its duties untinged by the glory of romance. She had had a brief dream ; but as so often happens in dreams of the night, she had awakened to the world of reality before reaching the promised consummation. Before her was uncertainty. Possibly her father, whom she loved with an affection

whose depth she was now beginning to be conscious of, would never know her again ; possibly ——, but she would not contemplate the darkest possibility which her imagination suggested. Even if he were well in health, he was broken in fortune, and the luxurious home to which she had been accustomed must be changed for something very different. But whatever the home was to be, now that trouble had fallen upon father and mother, her place was by their side, and whatever personal disappointment she had to bear, she must help to make their remaining years as comfortable as she could. So, with eager impatience to know all the truth, which Miss Crimpton's letter had dimly shadowed, with the settled conviction that her dream was broken never to be resumed, and with the determination to do what filial duty and affection demanded of her to the best of her ability, she reached Millvale once again.

No change had come over her father's

house, so far as she could perceive as she drove up to the door. Lights shone from the windows as in the past which now seemed so remote, and when the door was opened one of the old servants stood waiting for her to alight.

"Miss Wharton!" exclaimed the man, astonished out of his usual impassive composure.

"My father—where is he?" she asked.

"He's in the library, mum—at least, so I believe. Shall I go and see?"

"No. Mrs. Wharton—is she with him?"

"I think not, 'm. She's not been out of her room for three days."

"Is she ill?"

"Hysterical, 'm, but not ill."

"And is Mr. Wharton well?"

"As well as can be expected under the sukkumstances," said the man. "Of course you know, 'm, as things has gone wrong, and it preys upon his mind."

"Yes, yes," said Charlotte, cutting short the servant's explanation, and drawing a long sigh of relief. "Mr. Wharton is alone?"

"He is, 'm."

She knocked gently at the door of the room, but, receiving no answer, opened it and looked in. Her father sat by the side of the fire, his eyes intently fixed upon the flame, absorbed in thought. His hair was whiter than when she saw him last, and the lines upon his brow and about his eyes were deeper. But though these marks of past anxiety were evident, there was also something in the attitude, and in the expression of the face half turned towards her, which seemed to indicate a quietness of spirit different from what she would have expected. Whatever the precise nature of the calamity which had fallen upon him, he was well, and she had not to reproach herself with the thought that she had been the cause of his grief.

As she stood holding the door ajar, in a space of time almost too short to mark, pictures of the past—of her childhood and girlhood—flitted before her view—pictures of happy romps with him who now sat gazing into the fire unconscious of her presence, of days when he brought home a present as a bright surprise, of later occasions, when the frank confidence which once had existed between them had begun to be clouded, when he would listen to some more than ordinary high-flown speech with perplexed displeasure, until the perplexity and the displeasure melted into a look of pride and admiration; and, as the past thus re-lived in her recollection, her heart was filled with yearning love, and her eyes brimmed with tears.

“Father,” she said, softly.

He did not reply, but his face showed more of quiet happiness within.

“Father,” she repeated, more loudly,

taking a step or two forward and stretching out her hands as if beseeching a recognition.

He turned his head slowly ; his eyes met hers and were filled with joy.

“Charlotte, my child,” he said, in a tone of endearment, without any apparent surprise ; “I was thinking of you, my girl. I knew you’d come. Yes ? Yes.”

In another moment she was kneeling at his feet, with her head on his breast. With one hand he held her firmly, as if he were afraid that he might again lose her. With the other he stroked her face as if to soothe the feelings which now found vent in tears.

“Oh, father,” she said, as soon as she could speak, “I am afraid I have been very bad and very selfish in going away and leaving you.”

“No, my dear, it was we—it was I who was to blame. There, there !”

“I ought to have done what you wished,” said Charlotte, forgetting, in a rush of love

and penitence, the reasons which had actuated her.

“My dear, never mind all that now. Don’t trouble your heart about it. You were right to refuse to marry a man you did not love, a man you could not respect. I was wrong to insist upon your marrying him. I said so to your mother on the morning that you went away, and I have felt it ever since.”

“And mamma?” said Charlotte.

“Why, she, my dear, is hard to persuade. When she has once made up her mind to a thing she sticks to it. Yes? Yes. But,” he added after a moment’s reflection, “I think she sees the matter as I do now.”

“Then neither of you are angry with me? You do not think I have been very hard-hearted?”

“My dear,” said Mr. Wharton with unusual energy, “I am thankful you were firm enough to keep free from that man.

You saw through him in time ; we have had to learn what he is by experience, and a bitter experience it has been."

"He is connected with your trouble, then, papa ?"

"He is, my dear. Oh, my child, I feel as if I could bear all bravely now that you are here again. I did not know how necessary you were until I lost you for a time."

These were sweet words, worth giving up much of personal desire and ambition to hear. The doubts as to her reception, which had agitated her mind along with other gloomy thoughts, were now, so far as her father was concerned, laid at rest ; and she felt strengthened for the life of duty which stretched out before her.

"What brought you home, my child ? Did you know of this sad business ?" he asked, after a moment's silence, looking fondly into her upturned face.

"I heard something of it from—from a

person in Millvale who promised to let me know all she could learn of you. But I do not know what the evil is even yet. I only heard that some misfortune had happened. I feared you were ill."

"Poor child! You do not know that we are ruined—that I am a beggar?"

"No!" said Charlotte, starting to her feet. "And has Alexander Henderson done this?"

"It is not so bad as that. He is selfish, calculating, and vindictive; but the blame is more with me than with him. But I ought not to talk to you about him."

"Tell me all. Do not fear to wound me. All love for him went out of my heart when I found that he had acted basely towards an ignorant girl. After that I could believe the worst of him."

"Well, my dear, he has done nothing new that the world would blame——"

"The world!" cried Charlotte. "The

world often praises what is blackest and most vile ! ”

“ I told him that you had fled from him, and he wished to have my permission to find you out and bring you back. Then I told him that if I knew where you were—if you were under my own roof at that moment—I would support you in your refusal of him. I told him that I saw that I had been morally blind, but that you had opened my eyes. Then he looked at me out of his cold blue eyes, and said perhaps I should repent. I knew what he meant, and I knew that I was at his mercy to some extent ; and his cold, sneering manner, and his heartless, crafty villany, and the remembrance that it was through him that I had lost you for a time—all this roused me, and in a violent passion I said some very hard and bitter things, which a man of his nature was not likely either to forgive or forget. This took place in the office, and

he just rose from his seat and said, 'You are impulsive, Mr. Wharton ; your impetuosity has run away with your discretion. I will bid you good morning ;' and he walked out."

"It was my fault, then—at least, I was the cause of this trouble," said Charlotte.

"No, my dear, nothing of the kind. What could he have done if I had not been a fool ? The crash would have come sooner or later ; he might have staved it off for a time : it is just possible, barely possible, that he might have averted it altogether if he would. But I don't suppose he would have done that. It was not in his nature to have done it even if he obtained you as he wanted. You do not understand business, no woman does, or I might tell you the whole story. You will understand this, however : I had been for several years mixed up with some mining speculations, and instead of receiving any

profit, the money which I have spent my life in making was constantly being drawn upon, until at length the strain was becoming too severe. Henderson knew something of this: he knew that I must have a large amount of money to meet certain engagements, and he was willing to assist me in obtaining it, while he thought I was ready to give him you in return. You will learn to forgive me, my child, for thinking of making such a bargain?—for thinking of sacrificing you to save myself? But I hope you will never know what it is to have such a trial as I had and to pass through such misery.”

“Do not think of that, papa!” said Charlotte. “Tell me the rest.”

“There is little to tell, my dear. He not only would not assist me, but he did all he could to hinder me from obtaining money; I struggled like a drowning man for a few weeks, catching at any straw, but at last

the end came. All has gone, my dear. My share as senior partner in the firm ; all my private property—everything. We are living on here,” said the old man, looking round the room with a bewildered gaze, “because the blow was so heavy that it seemed to stun me for a time, and the creditors are very good and considerate. But we can’t stop here,” he continued, speaking with increasing vehemence. “The servants are all under notice, and will go at the end of the month. What we must do I cannot tell. Charlotte, you have come back to be our stay. We must depend on you.”

During the last few minutes there were, both in Mr. Wharton’s manner and speech, signs of an unhealthy excitement which his daughter could not regard without fear. The task before her seemed to be growing greater and more difficult. If the state of affairs were really so dark as her father

represented it would be a terrible task indeed. Seeing the necessity of diverting his attention, she questioned him no more, but sought to soothe him and bring back the quiet which, during their interview, had been disturbed. After a time he grew calm again, and Charlotte, kissing his forehead, said she would go to her mother, and then come and give him some tea.

She found Mrs. Wharton in her room. She was lying on a couch in one of the attitudes which Charlotte well remembered ; and on a table at her elbow were a smelling-bottle and a volume, elegantly bound, entitled "Consolations for the Afflicted." A servant had already informed her of Charlotte's arrival ; but still her refined mind could not bear a meeting with her daughter after such a separation without some poignant pangs. As soon as she saw Charlotte she burst into tears. After she had wept freely for five minutes or so, she gradually

recovered far enough to indulge for a quarter of an hour in voluble reproaches, and in questions to which she did not seem desirous of receiving answers, as she talked on without intermission. Charlotte sat by her side with quiet patience, careless of the unjust censure upon herself into which her mother was betrayed, but thinking, not without some reason, that her mother's place was by the side of her husband, and that if she would only go down and help him to bear his burden she would find her own materially lightened.

“And now that you have come back you have come to find we are paupers, and I hope you are satisfied,” said Mrs. Wharton. “Little did I think when I married your father that it would come to this! But, as this dear author says, ‘A merciful Providence hides from us the evils of future days.’”

“And Providence hides the good also,

mamma. It is better to think of the hidden good in the future than of the hidden evil."

"Of course you know better than I do, Charlotte—you always did ; and I am sorry to find that absence from home has not lessened your self-esteem."

"Dear mamma, I did not mean to hurt your feelings—I did not, indeed."

"You never did mean to wound my feelings, according to your own account, and yet you were always doing so. You might, however, spare me now ; and perhaps you will be good enough to tell me where you have been and what you have been doing while you have been out of sight and out of reach. You said you intended earning your own living, regardless of the shock such words would give to a mind constituted as mine is. Have you descended so low ?—for it is descending low when you are not obliged to do it. Now, however, you may be forced to earn your living, and I suppose

it will not be so pleasant. I don't know what we shall come to through your father's folly. I don't suppose I can bear up very long; the grave will have another victim, and the vulgar herd who have been accustomed to look up to me will triumph."

In a few words Charlotte related all the particulars of her doings which she thought her mother would care to know; and as Mrs. Wharton declared herself unable to leave her room, Charlotte returned to her father.

He retired early; and Charlotte, oppressed with physical fatigue, and laden with a sense of new and heavy responsibility, was glad to seek the quiet of her own room.

She felt puzzled and helpless. If she had had only herself to think of and to care for, she would have been able to see her way. But her father's fortunes were wrecked, and, though she trusted he might be spared, she still had in her inmost heart a fear that his

mind had received a shock from which it would not easily recover. Her mother, too, seemed incompetent to rise to the occasion. Some women, and some men, too, need a great trial to bring out the latent strength and sweetness of their being, and are nobler, if not happier, in adversity than in prosperity. In such instances strength and sweetness is communicated, and those who thus triumph over circumstances lift others up with them, and make them partakers of their victory. And, on the other hand, those who are conquered by adverse events, indulging in moanings and complaints, make the burden of those associated with them the more onerous. This was what Mrs. Wharton seemed inclined to do ; and not only had Charlotte to face grievously altered fortunes, but to face them without the help which she might justly have expected.

She thought of these things until her brain grew hot and dizzy, until she felt as

if she could think no more ; and when it seemed as if no help would come, there came into her mind the words, "As thy day so shall thy strength be," and those other words, "He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength." And with the solemn silence of the house that soon would be her home no more about her she knelt and prayed that she might have given to her both wisdom and strength sufficient for her need.

CHAPTER VI.


A PIMPERNEL.

DURING the succeeding fortnight Charlotte was too fully engaged to have time either for mourning over visions which had been dispelled, or for forming gloomy anticipations as to the future. Mrs. Wharton's delicate susceptibilities were not equal to the mortifications she would have endured had she been present at the breaking-up of the home, and she declared she would die if she saw strange men going about the rooms ticketing the furniture and making out a catalogue for the auctioneer. She accordingly accepted the invitation of a friend, and left the scene of misery, much to the relief of

everybody concerned. Mr. Wharton had been since he saw the crash was inevitable, and now was, too much engrossed with business affairs, and too much prostrated by the calamity which had overtaken him, to think of providing a new home to go to when he should be obliged to leave the old. When spoken to on the subject, however, he saw the necessity of something being done, and, as the result of a council held by Mr. Wharton, Mr. Stapleton, and Charlotte, it was decided to take a small house in a street near to Birk's Cottage. During these days of hard work and anxiety, Mr. Stapleton proved himself a constant and reliable friend. The Champleys, likewise, came forward with offers of sympathy and assistance, and with the money they supplied the house was furnished in time to receive Mr. Wharton before the sale began in the gilded drawing-room.

At length the settlement of Mr. Wharton's

business affairs was completed, and the ex-mayor of Millvale found that he was not quite a beggar. In his time he had been a free-handed and hospitable citizen, and the pompous pride which had grown upon him was forgotten or condoned. His most rancorous creditor could charge him with nothing worse than erroneous judgment in the conduct which had resulted in his ruin ; and the majority of those who knew him thought of that ruin with more of pity than of blame. So his creditors left something which they might have claimed ; and some of his old friends in the town made the something more, thus providing him with a small income for the remainder of his days. It was but small, certainly ; yet it was enough, with economy, to keep open the cottage in which he had gone to live, and to save him and those dependent upon him from actual fear for the future. He talked sometimes of trying to obtain a clerk's situation, saying



that it was too late in the day to think of rebuilding the edifice which had fallen, and that he must be content if he could add only a little to the income that was secured. But his friends persuaded him not to attempt anything of the kind for a time, until he should have recovered more completely from the effects of his losses.

From the outset of these new experiences, the whole ordering of the household affairs devolved upon Charlotte ; and in reckoning up what they would have coming in and going out she saw pretty clearly that she could not afford to keep even a solitary servant. She must manage the housekeeping and do the work herself, with help only in the roughest and heaviest work. This necessity she accepted bravely, although she felt most keenly and bitterly her utter ignorance of everything pertaining to domestic economy. She had never attempted to kindle a fire, or to cook a joint, or to make

a pudding ; making beds and washing-up were profound mysteries. Twenty times a day she wished that, instead of leaving her to her own devices after she came home from school, her mother had sent her into the kitchen so that she might have gained knowledge which would have been of use in the present contingency. A way out of these difficulties was, however, discovered. An old servant, who was married, and had a daughter old enough to be left in charge for a few hours each day, came, as she expressed it, “ to put her in the way of things ; ” and it was not an altogether unpleasant sight to see the queenly Charlotte—whose beauty increased as she became more grave and serious—with her sleeves tucked up, and a large apron fastened over her dress, rolling pastry, or polishing glasses, in the tiny kitchen. Now that the need had arisen, she bent all her energies to these prosaic tasks as completely and as successfully as under

different circumstances she had devoted them to the study of "Juliet." Like all beginners, she made mistakes which troubled her not a little at the time, but which in after days were the provocatives of many a laugh.

At the end of ten days she was supposed to be fairly "in the way of things," or, at any rate, the old servant, whose family affairs claimed her attention at home, thought her sufficiently advanced to be left to herself. And only now did she fully realize the extent of her ignorance. She could light a fire, make a bed, and wash-up; but she felt very doubtful on the point of dinner. She had had a piece of beef sent in, and it seemed to be roasting satisfactorily; but she remembered that her father always liked Yorkshire pudding with his beef, and as she was anxious that he should miss no little comfort that she could provide, she resolved to launch out on a grand

experiment. But what were the ingredients to be used? She had no cookery-book, and she had no one wiser than herself to consult. Flour she felt sure about, water she was convinced was a prime necessity, and salt was a matter of course. With these she compounded a batter that looked more pallid than she could have wished; but she reasoned that baking would give it a richer tinge.

When the beef was cooked and dished, she attempted to raise the pudding out of the tin dish; it had not browned and it stuck fast. But it was so tough that she succeeded in placing it in a rather shattered condition upon a dish, and, after an inward debate as to whether she should put it on the table or not, determined to run the risk in the hope that it would prove better than it looked.

“Will you have some pudding?” she asked when her father had assisted her and himself to beef.

"Pudding, my dear?" said her father, "certainly. It will be a great treat."

"I'm rather afraid," she said doubtfully.

"Afraid of what, my dear?"

"That it's not quite right. It looks too white and seems tough."

"Humph!" said her father, looking at his plate. But glancing up at the moment, and catching sight of the anxious look on his daughter's face he took a mouthful. "This," he said, as he struggled with the morsel, "is not a common pudding, but it's delicious."

"Oh no, it's not a bit like Yorkshire pudding," said Charlotte, after testing the result of her own experiment. "Don't eat it, papa."

"Not eat it, my dear? What do you mean? I say it's delicious, and if you can make puddings like this we shall get along capitally. Yes? Yes."

She knew the pudding was a failure, but

her father insisted upon a second serving, and reiterated again and again that it was most excellent. When the dinner was cleared away she indulged in some very cutting satire at her own expense, reminding herself that in former days she had thought herself competent to concoct schemes for the regeneration of mankind, and that now her pudding was more like a piece of chamois leather than anything else with which it could be compared.

The day after this episode her mother returned ; and when she saw the small rooms and the appointments, which were so poor compared with what she had become accustomed to in her later years, Mrs. Wharton indulged in an hour's uninterrupted weeping. This preliminary ceremony having been duly performed, she began to criticise the arrangements that had been made, and threw out a few suggestions—which she well knew to be impracticable—just to show the state

of refinement to which she had attained. But as Charlotte and Mr. Wharton bore her querulousness with patience, and displayed a proper amount of readiness to comply with her wishes, she grew more resigned, and fell into the ways of the new home more easily than might have been expected.

One afternoon while things were in this condition a knock was heard at the front door. Mr. Wharton was out; Mrs. Wharton was resting after the fatigues of a morning spent mainly in fault-finding. The chief tasks of the day were finished, and Charlotte was feeling weary and dispirited. She was in no mood for receiving visitors, but, of course, she must open the door and receive whoever was waiting.

It was Mr. Stapleton, and when she saw his genial face, and felt the grasp of his friendly hand, and heard the sympathetic tones of his voice, she was glad that he had come, and that he had come, too, at a time

when she could talk to him without the restraint of either her father's or her mother's presence.

"I am afraid you are tired," he said. "It is hard work for you to have so much responsibility upon your shoulders, and you must find your new labours very trying at first."

"Yes, I am rather tired," she said. "There are great changes, Mr. Stapleton, since I used to talk so wildly to you in the old days. Perhaps I was foolish, certainly I was ignorant, when I formed schemes of a noble and a beautiful life."

"I have been for a walk in the country," said Mr. Stapleton, as if he had not noticed her remark, "and I found this little flower."

He had laid what looked like a weed upon the table by his side, and now took it up and handed it to her.

"What a lovely little thing!" said Charlotte, examining the minute bloom; "I never saw one like it before."

"Then you don't know what it is?"

"No."

"It is a scarlet pimpernel."

"Why, the name is as pretty as the flower."

"And the more you look at the flower the more you will admire it. I need not ask you to notice the exquisite formation of the petals or the delicacy of the colouring."


"No, indeed. No one could fail to notice them after once noticing the flower."

"Could you imagine anything more beautiful?"

"No."

"And yet people would say it is only a weed; but in its place it is as beautiful as a rose or a lily. The amount of notice a flower attracts is not the measure of its perfection."

"Thank you, Mr. Stapleton," said Charlotte, colouring, "I will try to remember the lesson you have given me."



“And will you accept the pimpnrel as a reminder?”

“If you can spare it.”


“These changes of which you speak,” said the minister, “and against which we so often rebel, may have either a good or an evil effect upon the character of those concerned. In your case I am convinced the effect will be good.”

“I trust it may,” said Charlotte, “but as yet I cannot honestly say that I am reconciled to the change; perhaps I shall be by-and-by.”

“One thing, however, you are doing—you are accepting the duties which the alteration in your father’s position has thrown upon you, and looking them courageously and cheerfully in the face. I am an old man—old enough to be your father, at least, and you and I have been friends for years, so that I may speak to you more freely than another might. I know the motives

upon which you acted when you left your home last year. I know that one of the chief of those motives was that you wished to be of use in the world, and to seek a sphere of activity where all your powers might be exercised. You sought a way to be of use—God has now pointed you to a different way; and your life may be—will be—as effective in God’s way as in any way you could have found for yourself.”

Charlotte listened with bended head and swelling breast. She was beginning to see this strange, hard life into which she had been forced in a new light. Was it possible that it would prove as glorious as any career she could have selected? Yes, it was possible; and to make the possibility a reality rested with herself. Raising her eyes to Mr. Stapleton’s face she attempted to speak, but her heart was too full for speech. He saw how deeply she was touched, and changed the subject.




“I should like to take you into Birk’s Cottage,” he said; “you and the Misses Fry are near neighbours, and ought to know each other.”

CHAPTER VII.

A NEW FRIENDSHIP.

It is not to be supposed that the misfortunes of Mr. Wharton, forming, as they did, the subject of gossip and speculation through the whole town, had escaped the knowledge of the two old ladies at Birk's Cottage. From the first moment that they had heard rumours of the disasters which had befallen the ex-mayor their interest in the matter was of the liveliest kind. Much ingenious guessing took place as to the causes which had been in operation, and quite as much as to the results which were likely to follow. But when Miss Bridget one day came in with the news that a house had been taken

within a stone's throw of their garden gate, and that henceforth the Whartons were to be near neighbours, their interest became so eager as to border upon excitement. Mr. Wharton had been a public man, and was known to all the town in his public capacity ; for years he had been looked upon as one of the pillars of Mr. Stapleton's congregation ; and though the Misses Fry were Heather Street people, there existed such a connection between Heather Street and the small flock of which Mr. Stapleton was the shepherd, as to make them feel more or less closely bound up together. These reasons would have been sufficient, had no others existed, to arouse the concern of the Misses Fry. But they could not forget that in the past persons who had been their intimate friends had been influenced by the Whartons ; nor that Mr. Henderson, whom they had utterly cast off, though they had not ceased to care to hear of his doings, had held very close



relations with their future neighbours. These ties, which to others might have appeared very slight, did not so appear to the two sisters ; and their curiosity respecting the events in progress never flagged.

It was a source of great satisfaction and ease of mind when Mr. Wharton and Charlotte settled down in their new abode. The sisters felt that they had them under their own eye, so to speak ; and that they now had a far better chance of knowing the fortunes and the doings of the ex-mayor and his family than when they were further away.

By some mysterious process, to which, perhaps, the old servant who gave Charlotte assistance and instruction during the early days of her new experience, might have supplied a clue had she been so minded, the state of the household affairs under Charlotte's management became more or less accurately known in the neighbourhood. Bridget and

Molly were convinced that the economy of the new house must be in a sad condition ; and as they had time to spare, not having a lodger, they would have been glad to proffer their help and advice if they had known how to set about such a delicate matter. By this means not only would their curiosity have been gratified, but the real sympathy which they felt, and the strong desire which they had to aid any one in difficulty or distress, would also have found expression. Great as was their curiosity, their instinct of helpfulness was immeasurably greater ; and it was a source of positive discomfort to their good, kindly hearts to know of or to suspect any perplexity or distress which circumstances prevented them from alleviating.

Molly, indeed, with her usual rashness and impetuosity, proposed to act boldly.

“ I’m sure that lass knows naught o’ what ought to be done i’ a heause, an’ things ’ll just be a’ rucks an’ heaps. What con oo

know, bein' brought up as oo has ? I'st just go in an' help to set things straight."

"Tha'll do naught o' th' soart," said Miss Fry, emphatically.

"Why ?"

"Oo'll none want thee pokin' reaund. Just thee wait till tha'rt axed."


"But Miss Wharton 'll be too proud to ax for help," retorted Molly.

"Then oo'd be too proud to have it if it were offered," said Miss Fry.

"I don't think oo's sich a foo' as that," said Miss Molly, tossing her head.

"It isn't foolishness," said Bridget, "an' tha's no need to get cross abeaut it. But if tha'd been rich an' come down i' th' world tha wouldna care to ha' strangers forcin' the'rsels into thi heause; an' if th' lass doesn't know things it'd mortify her to ha' someb'dy 'at does at her elbow."

"Well, happen tha'rt reet," said Molly, half convinced, and yielding the point more



readily than she was accustomed to yield any point.

“If we bide our time a chance’ll come wi’out thrustin’ oursel’s forrad.”

“Happen it will ; an’ I’ll look out for a chance, an’ not let it pass.”

So the sisters had arrived at an amicable understanding in reference to her before the afternoon on which Mr. Stapleton invited her to accompany him to Birk’s Cottage.

It was their custom, so soon as their early dinner was cleared away, to “fettle themselves up”—that is to say, to change their dresses for garments a degree better than those in which they performed the domestic rites of the morning, and a degree inferior to those which were reserved for Sundays and other festivals. At the same time Miss Fry assumed her second-best cap. When the bright copper kettle had been filled and placed on the bar the two spinsters felt at liberty to settle down to a couple of hours’

knitting, and could talk out any subject in a thorough and comfortable fashion. It was at such a propitious season that Mr. Stapleton and Charlotte arrived.

“I have brought Miss Wharton to see you,” said the minister, after shaking hands with Miss Fry and Miss Molly. “She is now quite a near neighbour of yours.”

“But oo came to Birk’s Cottage before oo were a neighbour,” said the indiscreet Miss Molly.

Miss Fry frowned and shook her head at her sister, to remind her that probably Miss Wharton would not like to have her previous visit recalled. Charlotte, however, put her at her ease by replying—

“Yes, so that we are not strangers.”

“No, an’ I hope we shall be less so,” said Miss Molly, glancing defiantly at her sister; “an’ I hope yo’ll come in here just when yo’ like.”

“Molly !” said Miss Fry, in a tone of

grave reproof, "Tha'rt makin' very free wi' thi superiors."

"Superiors!" cried Miss Molly, with scornful emphasis. "I have no superiors, an' no inferiors. We're a' o' one stock, I reckon; an' I think mysel' as good as other fowk, an' other fowk as good as me."

"Miss Molly tries to keep abreast of the march of intellect," said Mr. Stapleton, laughingly, to the elder lady.

"March of impidence!" said Miss Fry, trying to look severe while returning Mr. Stapleton's smile. "But Molly lets her tongue run away wi' her."

"An' what's th' use of havin' a tongue if you don't use it? I say what I think, an' I say it to fowk's faces, an' I don't see much harm i' that; do you, Mr. Stapleton?"

"Not in your case, perhaps," replied the minister, "though there might be in others."

"An' oo's allus gettin' into somb'dy's black books," said Miss Fry, smiling in

spite of all her efforts to maintain her gravity.

“Oo’s thinkin’ of a clergyman ’at called this mornin’,” said Miss Molly, evidently eager to relate a story of her prowess in debate.

“An’ what did he say?” said Mr. Stapleton, with a glance at Charlotte to indicate that she might expect some amusement.

“Well, I were ironin’ some starched things at that table when he came to th’ door. ‘May I come in?’ he says. ‘Ay, you con come in,’ I says, though I didn’t want him, because I knew he’d waste me a iron. ‘Do you go to church?’ he says. ‘Neaw,’ I says. ‘Don’t you go to any place of worship?’ he says. ‘Not often,’ I says. ‘Don’t you think you’d be better if you did?’ he says. ‘Neaw,’ I says. ‘Why?’ he says. ‘Because,’ says I, ‘I know a lot o’ fowk ’at’s no better for goin’ to church, an’ ’at’s worse for goin’.’

‘Worse?’ says he; ‘how do you make that out?’ ‘Why, if they didn’t go,’ says I, ‘they wouldn’t be pretendin’ to be better nor other fowk, an’ they wouldn’t be addin’ hypocrisy to the’r sins.’ ‘An’ do you say you know people who are not better for goin’ to church?’ he says. ‘Ay,’ I says, ‘I could point to a dozen i’ your congregation.’ ‘But do you think you ought to judge ’em?’ he says. ‘Yis,’ I says, ‘that’s a privilege no man can deprive me of. We can’t help seein’ things, an’ when we see things we can’t help judgin’. Yo’ll judge me, an’ I shall judge yo’,’ I says. ‘I *shall* judge yo’,’ I says. ‘And where do you go when you go anywhere?’ he says. ‘Well,’ I says, ‘I don’t go anywhere often, but I ca’ Heather Street my shop.’ ‘An’ do you believe in God?’ he says. ‘Of course I do,’ I says. ‘An’ what do you think sin is?’ he says. ‘Aught ’at’s wrong,’ I says. ‘An’ what do you think repentance is?’ he

says. 'Well,' I says, 'I don't think it's what many fowk thinks it is. I don't think I repent,' I says, 'if I only pretend to be sorry when I've done aught 'at's wrong; but I should have repented if I'd done something wrong to you if I made up my mind not to do th' same again either to you or anybody else.' 'Have you a Bible?' he says. 'Yis,' I says. 'Do you read it?' he says. 'Sometimes,' I says; 'not often.' 'Why not?' he says. 'Because I think it's better to spend my time tryin' to do what I've learnt nor in learnin' it all o'er again,' I says. 'Will you lend it to me for a few minutes?' he says. 'What for?' I says. 'I should like to read to you,' he says. 'I can read for mysel',' I says. 'You seem very decided,' he says. 'I *am* decided,' I says. 'An' now,' I says, 'I think yo'd better go. Yo've wasted me one iron, an' I can't spare ony more time.' 'Well,' he says, 'perhaps I shall call again when yo're

not so busy.' 'I don't think yo' will,' I says, 'an' you needn't trouble;' an' so he went away." As Miss Molly finished her narrative she glanced round with an air which plainly challenged the admiration of her listeners, and very clearly indicated that she thought she had shown to great advantage in her little encounter.

"So yo' see," said Miss Fry, taking up her parable again, "oo's got into another person's black books to-day. They'll think Birk's Cottage is a hot place."

"I nobbut gave him straight answers to his questions," said Miss Molly. "But Bridget is allus for being cautious an' not offendin' fowk. But I don't care. If they can't bear to be told plain truth they'd better keep away. 'Speak out, an' fear not,' is my motto, an' I believe that's i' th' Bible."

"I think not," said Miss Fry. "Is it, Mr. Stapleton?"

"I don't remember it," said the minister, laughing.

"Then it ought to be : it's good enough," retorted Molly, triumphantly. "We were talkin' only t'other day," she continued, "abeaut yo', Miss Wharton, an' I said——"

"Nivver mind what tha said. Do be quiet for once !" cried Miss Fry, sharply.

"I shan't ! I said 'at yo' wern't used to that soart o' work yo' ha' to do neaw."

"Tha' ought to be ashamed o' thyself," said Miss Fry.

"But I'm not. There's naught to be ashamed on. It's true, isn't it, Miss Wharton ?"

"Quite," replied Charlotte, with a smile.

"An' I said," continued Miss Molly, with an emphatic nod, "'at yo'd likely be glad of a bit o' help. I've plenty o' time to spare, an' I could just run in and tell yo' aught yo' don't know, an' show yo' how to do things."

"You are very kind," said Charlotte, who

appreciated the real goodness of heart underlying Miss Molly's rough exterior, "and I shall be much obliged if you will do so. I am very ignorant of many things I should like to know."

"There !" cried Miss Molly, turning upon her sister, "talkin's done some good for once. I shall feel more comfortable after that."

The opportunity was thus made for which the two sisters had wished ; and, as Miss Molly had no idea of making any offer which she did not mean to follow up, and had no conception of an offer of the kind she had made being accepted merely as a matter of politeness, she presented herself the next day at the Whartons' door, with the remark that she had come to make herself useful.


The two sisters were much in the habit of judging persons with whom they had to do by their first impressions. They could soon tell, they said, whether they would like any

one or not. They were sincerely sorry for the Whartons, and for Charlotte they had conceived, even after the slight intercourse they had had with her, a very warm liking. Charlotte, on her part, respected them more as she knew them better, and the connection established between them was for her of a very beneficial and salutary kind. She had now some one to whom she could go in all her household difficulties, and they grudged no trouble to which they were put. They inducted her into many a domestic mystery, and soon she was able to make a Yorkshire pudding which was not such a dead failure as that which her first attempt produced.

But these were not the only advantages which Charlotte derived from her intercourse with the Misses Fry. As the intimacy ripened, and she saw more of their lives, Mr. Stapleton's remark often recurred to her mind. "The amount of notice a flower attracts is not the measure of its perfection."

Here were two old ladies, little known, but using their means and their powers in doing their duty in a quiet, unobtrusive fashion, and whose greatest joy was to confer some benefit upon their fellow-creatures. Charlotte saw the beauty of such conduct, and the conviction grew that this patient continuance in well-doing was, in the eye of One who could distinguish between shows and realities, worth far more than much that passes current under the name of heroism or philanthropy.

At first Mrs. Wharton objected to the growing intimacy with Birk's Cottage. The Misses Fry were not sufficiently refined to suit the tastes of such a fastidious lady. They knew nothing of society, and though Mrs. Wharton was herself in the position of the Peri that was shut out from Paradise, it was not to be expected that she should altogether relish the company of persons to whom the very dialect of Paradise was



unknown. But even her repugnance was gradually overcome. Mrs. Wharton was not great in the construction of an argument, but she could not help drawing, from facts which fell beneath her notice, a conclusion which greatly assisted in bringing about her reconciliation. She noticed that on the occasions when Miss Molly Fry spent an hour or two in the kitchen with Charlotte there was generally some dainty dish for dinner, or that when Miss Molly and Charlotte were for a morning or an afternoon busy upstairs together there was sure to be some rearrangement of the furniture or some ingenious contrivance which added materially to her own or her husband's comfort. These things might have been explained on the hypothesis of coincidence if they had occurred only once or twice, but when they occurred many times such an hypothesis was plainly inadequate. No conclusion, indeed, was tenable but that Miss Molly was instru-

mental in bringing about these desirable results, and hence Mrs. Wharton thought it better to tolerate her presence and not to interfere with an acquaintance which, under other circumstances, would have been highly objectionable.

As for Mr. Wharton, he acquiesced in all that Charlotte did or said, and was full of mild surprise at the wonderful manner in which his home was managed. He was not ill ; but he seemed, as the weeks went by, to lose his energy, both of body and mind—to become less anxious about his position—more childlike in all his words and ways. And, as she watched him, Charlotte thought of light dying out of an evening sky.

CHAPTER VIII.

HEATHER STREET ONCE MORE.

As the intimacy between Charlotte and the occupants of Birk's Cottage ripened, Charlotte often went in to see her friends, generally to ask for information or advice on some point concerning which she was not quite clear, or to return, in some measure, the kindness of which she was the recipient, by assisting Miss Fry to re-make a cap or Miss Molly to alter the style of a dress. During these visits, as well as at other times, she heard a good deal of Heather Street and of some of the Heather Street people with whose names she was already familiar. One or another of the Heather Street folk were often at Birk's

Cottage; but Charlotte did not encounter any of them until she had been settled in her new home for several months.

On a Saturday evening in September, she and the Misses Fry were engaged in a mysterious redistribution of ribbons and flowers, when, from the parlour window, they saw Dawson Schofield open the garden gate, and heard him, a moment later, knocking at the door.

"I think I had better go," said Charlotte.
"There is a visitor coming."

"Nay, nivver mind him. It's only Dawson Schofield," replied Molly.

Miss Fry admitted him and ushered him into the room. The sisters, by way of an introduction, informed him that that was Miss Wharton; and after nodding his head towards her, as a recognition of the fact that they were henceforth on speaking terms, Dawson seated himself on the chair nearest to the door.

"I think I con guess, at twice, what yo've come for," said Miss Molly.

"Ay, it's abeaut th' usual time," returned Dawson.

"An' I suppose th' usual answer 'll do?" said Miss Fry.

"Ay, that's good enough if yo' con manage it," said Dawson.

"Yo' see, Miss Wharton," said Miss Fry, in explanation of this enigmatical colloquy, "it'll be Heather Street singing a week to-morrow, an' when we haven't a lodger they generally come an' ax us to have th' parson."

"Some on 'em seem feart out o' the'r life to have a parson i' the'r heause," said Molly.

"But that's not our way. We give him th' best we have, an' if that isn't good enough he con go where he'll be better tretted."

"I don't think any one would wish to be better treated than you would treat him," said Charlotte. "Certainly I think no minister would."

"None on 'em's grumbled yet that I know on," said Miss Fry.

"Yo've been to a sing at Heather Street, haven't yo', Miss Wharton?" said Dawson. "We talk a good deal abeaut th' parson, but th' parson isn't th' great mon that day. Fowk don't come to our anniversary to hear th' parson, but to see th' childer an' hear 'em sing. There are hundreds that don't go to chapel or church all th' year round 'at comes to Heather Street singing."

"Yes, I have attended more than once," replied Charlotte. "I suppose many of the people who are present on that day have been scholars in the school at one time?"

"Ay, they have. When they grow up they seem to drift away; but they have a warm corner i' the'r hearts for Heather Street, an' they come an' they give at th' collection too."

"It is a pity they don't keep up a closer

connection with the place that has done so much for them," said Charlotte.

"It is a pity," said Dawson. "But it's th' same a' through life. Childer grow up, get wed, leave th' old homes an' make new 'uns o' the'r own; an' happen go to see th' old man an' th' old woman once or twice a year. Every Sunday schoo' could tell a tale like Heather Street. But one cause 'at we lose so many young men an' women is 'at we want better teachers. Yo' see they soon learn a' 'at such as me con teach 'em, an' they think it is no use comin' ony longer, an' then they leave both schoo' an' chapel. Neaw, if we had someb'dy like yo', Miss Wharton, for th' young women's class——" Dawson hesitated, and looked inquiringly at Charlotte.

"I really feel so ignorant myself, Mr. Schofield, that I should not like to attempt to teach others," said Charlotte, hardly knowing what to reply to this proposal.

"But you know more nor them yo'd ha' to teach," said Dawson.

"Besides," added Charlotte, "I don't know how I could leave home. I am not so much at liberty as I once was, and I have duties which must not be neglected."

"We could arrange that," said Miss Fry, "an' it 'ud be a grand thing for Heather Street if they got yo' into th' schoo'. Them lasses 'ud be off their heads wi' delight if they got such a teacher."

"I'd see after th' dinner of a Sunday mornin', and clear away i' th' afternoon too," said Miss Molly.

"But I should not like to trespass so much on your kindness," said Charlotte.

"We shouldn't do it for yo'," said Molly, sharply, "we should be doin' it for Heather Street."

"Well, happen yo'll think abeaut it," said Dawson, "an' let me know. Yo'll come to th' singing a week to-morrow, choose how?"

“Certainly, I shall hope to do that. But as to becoming a teacher, I must have time to think the matter over. It is not a work to be lightly undertaken.”

Dawson shortly afterwards took his departure; and Miss Fry and Miss Molly at once began to show how feasible it was for Charlotte to accede to his request. They believed with him that Charlotte might do a large amount of good among the young people in the school. They were unfit to help Heather Street in that way, they said: but if she would allow them to do her house-work on Sundays so as to set her quite free they would be helping indirectly, and nothing could give them greater pleasure.

Charlotte felt strongly inclined to yield to their solicitations. Here, it seemed, was a work of usefulness which she might do even in her altered circumstances. Compared with the career which she had at one time mapped out for herself this was a very lowly

one ; and though it would never bring so much attention to herself, it might certainly be made of equal or of greater benefit to her fellows. It was significant that she should look at the matter from this point of view. It showed that the discipline of adversity through which she had passed and was passing had not been altogether without effect—that it had raised her character and cleared her moral vision. There are in the world hundreds, perhaps thousands of persons who will be enabled by their own inner experience to appreciate the change wrought by time and circumstance—or, we ought rather to say, by the God who operates through time and circumstance—in Charlotte's mode of looking at her life. It is by no means uncommon for one who is conscious of powers of thought, of imagination, of affection, to long very earnestly to escape from the dull sameness of ordinary existence. Contemplating the pitiful cares,

the small ambitions, the low aims which seem to content the majority, the young, aspiring soul feels impelled to break away from usual paths and signalize itself by some unparalleled feat. As probably as not, the picture which ambition of this kind projects on to the canvas of the future years seems noble and beautiful, because it shows the dreamer performing matchless services for the world at large—uttering or interpreting noble thoughts, evolving and carrying into effect beneficent reforms, aiding mankind to take a great stride forward in the path of progress. The picture seems a very beautiful one, but maybe it would not seem so very beautiful if it were clearly perceived how selfishness pervades it through and through. It is not the benefits to be dispensed which are the real actuating power and the source of the picture's attractiveness, but the personal glory to be won. So, by a trick of self-illusion, we come to think that we are

desiring the regeneration of the race when we are only thinking how fine a thing it would be if we could become the agents of that regeneration—if we could win the plaudits which such a work would deserve and receive—the plaudits of our fellows, or, at least, the supreme luxury of well-earned self-applause. And hence we wish to choose our own course where the promise of such reward is brightest. We will escape from the dull routine, from the level monotony of custom; we will desert the valley where men who pant after no great achievements are content to walk, and scale the mountain side, whence we may scatter blessings broadcast on the world beneath, and where all the world can see us and admire! But if we have anything in us beyond mere narrow selfishness, we see, as the years go by, how confused have been our aims, that under the pretence of serving man and God we have been seeking to exalt ourselves. And along

with this perception there comes to us the suspicion which deepens into a conviction, that the life which we have taught ourselves to despise—the life of the undistinguished crowd down there in the valley—is richer than we deemed, richer in actual existing worth, far richer in potentialities. Even among the toiling mass, where we shall attract no notice and startle no crowds into admiration of ourselves and our worth, a work of which an immortal need not be ashamed may be done, and is being done by numbers whom we, in our days of moral blindness, should have passed by as prosaic, uninteresting, and unheroic. And then comes our temptation in the wilderness. We have to choose whether we will bow down and worship the Satan of self, relying upon its promise that thus we shall win the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, or whether, abandoning all thought of honour for ourselves, we will seek with a single

heart to do the work which is nearest to us, and which most urgently needs to be done.

But though Charlotte was now prepared to choose the better part, she did not quite clearly see her way to give an affirmative reply to Dawson Schofield's request. She was not certain of her fitness for the office which he suggested she might fill; and she was determined to listen to no call that would interfere with the performance of her duty in her home. And, therefore, she said nothing more definite to her friends than that she would keep the question in her mind, and give a decisive answer as soon as she was able.

When she mentioned to her father that the Heather Street "singing"—as the Sunday-school anniversary services were colloquially called—was about to take place, he expressed his readiness to accompany her, and on the appointed day the two presented

themselves at the chapel. The building was crowded to its utmost extent; every seat was occupied, the benches in the aisles were filled, and not even a foot of standing-room was vacant. As the reader, who recalls the particulars given in an earlier chapter of this history, will remember, the pulpit, approached by a high flight of steps, stood against the only side of the building to which the gallery did not extend; and above and behind the pulpit was a small recess in which the organ stood, with the choir in front. But on this occasion not only was the organ-loft crowded with an augmented choir, but reaching from the front of this loft down to the floor, and completely surrounding the pulpit, was a temporary gallery, affording seven rows of seats one above another. And on this gallery were arranged some sixty girls, those in the bottom rows young women, with younger girls above, and younger still above them,

the top row consisting of children of five or six years of age—all selected from the scholars in the school, and trained to take their part in the music of the day. The dresses of the young women were black, and all the rest were white; and it was a sight worth seeing, and one which it would be hard to match outside Lancashire, as these sixty maidens sat with radiant faces looking on the crowded congregation.

But if this sight were wonderful what was it when, the minister having announced the first hymn, they all, at a sign from the conductor, rose in their places and sang their psalm of praise? Aided by the organ and the choir, and by the voices of many of the congregation too, they filled the building with their jubilant song, and many a wanderer lingered in the street outside to listen to the swelling melody, and in many a heart memories of the innocent past were roused to life, and hope was brightened, and

aspiration rendered more strong and pure. And the minister prayed, and read how the Friend of children said "Suffer the little ones to come unto Me;" and preached a sermon which both young and old might understand; and more hymns and an anthem were sung with wonderful feeling and precision.

At last the assembly began to disperse, and Mr. Wharton, whose cheeks were wet, said to Charlotte, with a sigh, and with a look as of one awakening from a dream—

"Is it all over?"

"Yes," she replied, "and the people are going home."

"Ah, I'm sorry," he said, "it was like being in heaven. I could have sat here and never tired."

"Miss Wharton, I hope yo're pleased," said Dawson Schofield, leaning across the back of a pew to speak to her. "Hasn't it been grand?"

"I have been more pleased than I can tell," replied Charlotte.

"Did yo' notice that man in th' seat i' front o' you, a bit to your right—the one 'at seemed completely broken deawn? He cried as if his heart 'ud burst."

"Yes."

"That were Isaac Briggs. His Helen used to be a singer. We allus think o' them 'at's been singers on th' singing day. An' Hiram Greg has been i' my mind a' the time. I had a letter from him only last week, an' he says he shall come and fetch his mother as soon as he's made enough money. He were a good lad, Hiram were."

This speech touched springs of feeling in Charlotte's breast, which made her unwishful to pursue the subject; and she looked anxiously around to ascertain if the crowd had cleared away sufficiently for her and her father to pass out.

"I think we can go now," she said.

"Come, father;" and she offered him her arm.

"One minute, Miss Wharton. "Have yo' thought abeaut what I said at Birk's Cottage?"

"Yes, I have considered it all the week, and shall do my best."

"Then we may tell th' lasses they may reckon on yo' for next Sunday?"

"Yes."

"That'll make it a happy singing day for them," said Dawson, rubbing his hands gleefully.

The remembrance of this service seemed to abide in Mr. Wharton's mind to the exclusion of almost every other topic. During the week he referred to it again and again, and when the next Sunday morning came he asked Charlotte absently if she were going to another singing at Heather Street, and if he might go with her? And the expression on his face as he asked the question made

her think of the light dying out of an evening sky.

Miss Fry and Miss Molly were as good as their word, and every Sunday served Heather Street by setting Charlotte free from her household duties that she might attend to her class. And Charlotte grew to love the work in which she had engaged ; and her scholars loved her because they saw that she was not grudgingly performing a disagreeable task, but serving them with her whole heart.

Her life would have flowed in a clear and even current, and been broken by no deep discontent, but for two circumstances. One was that her mother never so completely adapted herself to the change in her position as to either be or seem happy and satisfied ; and that she fretted Charlotte with constant complaints, and with drawing foolish, useless contrasts between the present and the past. At one time Charlotte would have irritably

resented this conduct, but she now bore it with sweet patience, and tried with all her power to remove every cause of annoyance from her mother's way. Still it was a burden to her ; it was a thorn in the flesh. But a far more serious source of disquiet was the state of her father's health. It was impossible to disguise the fact that both body and mind became weaker day by day. His memory seemed utterly to fail sometimes, and he grew so feeble that it was with difficulty he could come downstairs. Charlotte noted these things secretly for a while, and at last told her mother she was sure there was something seriously wrong. The doctor came, and said there was no cause for immediate alarm ; Mr. Wharton had received a severe shock, from which he had not recovered, and care and nursing were all that he required.

Shortly after Christmas Charlotte felt it necessary to suspend her attendance at

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Heather Street, as she could not bear, even on one day in the week, to be away from him. He now kept his room, and was almost as helpless as a child. Mrs. Wharton and Charlotte waited on him constantly, and Miss Molly spent the greater part of each day in the house. At length the anniversary of the day on which he had left his stately mansion and taken up his abode in this little cottage came round; and the day, or some subtle influence which it is impossible to explain, suggested to him thoughts of the catastrophe in which his fortune had been wrecked, and he talked in a disjointed way of shares, and mortgages, and creditors.

Charlotte was sitting silent by the bedside, listening to his broken words as the evening was closing in, when she saw his hand wandering over the coverlet as if seeking something. She placed her own gently upon it; and looking into her face he said—

"He's not a hard creditor, is He, Charlotte? He will not insist upon the payment of all our debts, or not one could stand before Him."

"No, dear father, no. But won't you try to sleep?"

Leaving him for a moment she called her mother; and they saw that the end was near.

"Those girls in white are singing," he said, as they bent over the bed, "and they will sing on for ever now. Yes? Yes."

And so his life passed away, like light dying out of an evening sky.

CHAPTER IX.

AN INTERVAL.

WHILE Hiram Greg was maintaining a quiet, persistent, uneventful struggle for fortune in the wilds of South Australia; while Charlotte Wharton was being sobered and refined by the discipline of adversity in Millvale, the English nation was passing through a most momentous crisis. Before Hiram left the country the Anti-Corn-Law League had done sufficient good work to raise the hopes of its friends and the fears of its enemies; the agitation which it promoted grew daily in magnitude; and the arguments of its inspiring minds, and the stern logic of widely prevalent distress, enforced the conviction of the fatuity of closing our

ports to the food of millions in the supposed interests of a class. Despite the hostility which some of the Chartist leaders tried to foment among their followers, the policy of the League won more and more sympathy from the masses, and while the one movement waned, or broke out with only fitful strength, the other rolled on with the steadily increasing energy of a mighty stream. At length came the triumph of Villiers, Cobden, Bright, and their myriad helpers ; and the artificial barriers to the importation of bread, set up by political folly, were cast down. By this means the distress was greatly alleviated, and, as this alleviation became more felt, the discontent, which had been one of the chief inciting influences with many of the rank and file of the Chartist party, was naturally lessened, and the party was proportionately enfeebled. Other concurrent causes, into which it is needless to enter, were also at work, and at the end of two

years from the abolition of the corn laws, Chartism had ceased to be a power in the land.

During these eager and anxious years Charlotte pursued, with patient steadfastness, the path which had been marked out for her. In her home she had abundant employment. Her father's death, though a source of the profoundest grief, did not crush her energies. The claims upon her were so pressing that she could not afford to indulge in the luxury of woe. Mrs. Wharton seemed unable to comprehend that grief may be sincere and deep, and yet make no outward show. Hence, when she saw Charlotte going about her daily tasks with a grave face and composed demeanour, she not only thought her unfeeling, but charged her with being so. Mrs. Wharton considered it due to herself, to her refined nature, to the position she had occupied, to let people see that she was sensible of the loss she had sus-

tained. So she put on very deep crape, rose later in the morning, lay down with more regularity in the afternoon, freely wiped her eyes and bemoaned her condition when people called to see her, and generally conducted herself according to the rules of the genteelest melancholy. It was fortunate that there was beneath all this show some reality of sorrow to redeem it from being a complete sham. But this egotistic self-assertion, this weak and morbid self-indulgence, made the weight of Charlotte's burden greater. Yet she bore up bravely under the additional load, and her patience and love rose with the demands made upon them.

As time went on, and Mr. Wharton's death receded farther and farther into the past, his widow's ostentation of regret gradually subsided ; but her self-indulgent habits were too firmly fixed to undergo any change, and she lived a querulous, dissatisfied, and useless life.


Home under such circumstances would have been almost intolerable, had there been no wider interests to engage mind and heart and to refresh the jaded spirit. This wider interest Heather Street supplied to Charlotte. Her class was composed of young women, almost every one of whom during the week worked in the mill. They were ignorant, but eager to learn. Like the majority of Lancashire folks, they were at first reserved ; but as they found that Charlotte's heart was put into her work, their reserve melted away, and they soon began to feel, not only gratitude for the benefit they received from her lessons, but that affectionate trust which some noble dispositions seem specially fitted to inspire. They went to Charlotte for advice ; they made her the recipient of their secrets ; they accepted her hints and rebukes in relation to what was faulty in their own speech and behaviour. The troubles through which Charlotte herself had passed enabled

her to enter into their feelings, and to sympathize with their trials as she never could have done had her way been entirely smooth ; and while she was helped by the consciousness that her life was helpful to others, her pupils were not only instructed by her lessons, but were elevated and refined by contact with her stronger nature and more cultured mind.

There were certain names which she often heard at Heather Street, which were suggestive of some of the most painful memories. Helen Briggs' brothers and sisters were scholars, and Hiram Greg was frequently mentioned. But she determined not to give way to over-sensitiveness, and not to dwell upon the past ; and though the thought of Henderson, and the shameful associations connected with him, would occasionally recur to her mind, they obtruded themselves with less frequency as time went on and as her own moral strength increased.

Two years had passed from the date of her father's death, when a pale, timid girl of about sixteen, who gave the name of Margaret Briggs, was put into her class. She must have seen this girl repeatedly, but until she came into close contact with her she had never noticed the striking likeness between her and the young woman who, long ago, came to make an appeal in reference to the trial of Hiram Greg. The likeness, however, was unmistakable, and Charlotte had no doubt that this was the sister of the unfortunate Helen. She had not been in the class long when she fell ill, and Charlotte went to visit her at her home.

Time and trouble seemed to have dealt gently with Mrs. Briggs, so far as her appearance was concerned; she was the same clean, active, bustling, little woman as of old. The grandfather's chair stood empty by the fireplace; but this appeared to be the only noticeable change that had taken place



since Mr. Stapleton and Hiram Greg called on that June Sunday afternoon in 1842.

Charlotte sat and chatted for half an hour with her pupil. When she came downstairs Mrs. Briggs offered her a chair, and seemed inclined to detain her.

“Eh, Miss Warton, Margaret ’ll be proud to ha’ had yo’ a lookin’ at her; oo’s been talkin’ for months abeaut th’ time oo’d be put into your class. An’ I thought at one time none o’ my childer ’ud go to Heather Street again.”

“Indeed! Did they seem disinclined to go?” said Charlotte, in a tone of surprise.

“Neaw; but the’r feyther were very queer abeaut Chartism, an’ a’ that rubbish, an’ he noather went hisself nor would he let them go. But he’s a altered man.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I think I saw him at Heather Street more than two years ago; he must have changed his opinions before then?”

"It were trouble 'at did it; trouble often changes fowk gradely."

"Yes," said Charlotte, "and it is well when the change is for the better."

"Yo' see," said Mrs. Briggs, "his feyther died very sudden, an' that set him studyin'; an' then we lost our lass, our poor Helen."

"I heard of her death," said Charlotte, "and I was very sorry for you."

"That were very kind of yo'," said Mrs. Briggs, wiping her eyes. "Well," she continued, "yo' know men's queer creeturs, an' yo' can't tell how they'll take things. I expected Isaac to cut up very rough, an' to be very awk'ard; but I were real glad to find that he took it th' other way. I allus said 'at he were good at th' bottom, an' he's shewed 'at I were reet."

"I suppose," said Charlotte, almost at a loss for a remark, "that he still continues to hold his Chartist opinions?"

“Nay, even them’s changed,” said Mrs. Briggs. “He got some papers abeaut free trade, an’ when he’d read ’em he said ’at Richard Cobden an’ John Bright were reet, an’ ’at what they wanted were better nor Chartism. Then he got in wi’ some o’ th’ fowk ’at were tryin’ to start a co-operative store, an’ they put him on th’ committee ; an’ since th’ corn laws were repealed he’s been altogether taken up wi’ co-operation, an’ says if ever th’ workin’ classes is to do th’ best for themsel’s ’at con be done they mut do it through co-operation. Isaac mut have summat to occupy his mind, an’ I think he’s got hold o’ th’ reet end o’ th’ stick neaw.”

A few weeks after this visit, when she was leaving Heather Street one Sunday afternoon, Charlotte was accosted by a tall woman whom she had noticed among the congregation on several previous occasions, and who had specially attracted her atten-

tion by the manner in which she had stared at her as if trying to read her face.

"Yo' don't know me?" said the woman.

"No, I have not the pleasure. Perhaps you are the mother of one of my scholars."

"Nay, my name's Greg."

"Oh, I see," said Charlotte, puzzled to account for Mrs. Greg's seeking to make her acquaintance.

"Ay, Hiram's my lad. Yo' remember Hiram?" said Mrs. Greg inquiringly.

"Quite well. I hope you have good news of him?" replied Charlotte.

"Ay, naught but good news."

"I'm very pleased to hear that."

"I thought yo' would be. Yo' see I've often thought it mut o' preyed upo' your mind to know yo' helped to send him out o' th' country, an' I wished to tell yo' yo' needn't fret, as it's been a good thing for him. Why, he's gettin' quite a rich man neaw. I can hardly believe 'at it's a' true

when I get his letters tellin' abeaut his sheep an' his land. If he'd stopped i' Millvale he might ha' been a poor weyver a' his life."

"It's very kind of you to tell me this, and I am glad both for his sake and for yours, that you have such good news to tell."

"Nay, it's not kind at a'. It's nobbut reet. Yo' see, I hear o' yo' doin' so mich good among them lasses, 'at I thought I wouldn't like yo' to have aught disagreeable on your mind, an' besides yo' didn't mean him ony harm."

"No, certainly, I should greatly have preferred to say nothing; but I could not choose. You must have felt your son's absence all these years very much."

"Ay, I've felt it. I expect I shouldn't be a mother if I didn't."

"And I suppose you often hear from him—he writes regularly?"

"As regular as he con. Yo' see he's a

long way from a post-office; but he does his best. And he sends money ivvery time, so 'at I needn't go to th' mill, an' both Fred an' Sally—they's my sister's childer 'at I took to when oo died—have both had a bit o' schoolin'."

"And does your son speak of coming home at all," said Charlotte.

"Sometime. He's not in a hurry; but I hope I'll live to see him again. He talks o' fetchin' me, but I don't think I should care to live among black men an' kangaroos. An' then there's Fred an' Sally to consider. I couldn't leave them till they're old enough to fend for theirsels'."

"Well, it is a great pleasure for you to look forward to seeing your son again, and I trust it will not be very long before he comes."


After this, Charlotte never saw Mrs. Greg without making some inquiry concerning Hiram, and Mrs. Greg was too proud of

him, and of the success which he was achieving, to feel any reluctance in talking of his doings.

It has been remarked by historians that there are some periods in the lives of nations which are so uneventful that the noteworthy transactions of several generations can be related in a few words; while, on the contrary, other seasons, of no great actual duration, are so crowded with momentous occurrences as to appear to occupy an entirely disproportionate bulk in the record. The same remark may be made in reference to the careers of individuals, or groups of individuals whose fates are bound up together. But during these times of apparent rest silent forces are at work, on the small scale as well as on the great, preparing the way for what is yet to come; and when this is considered, it is seen that they are important no less than the livelier periods of action and excitement.

The years in which Charlotte was winning the gratitude of her pupils and the esteem and goodwill of all the Heather Street people were years of which no detailed account is necessary. So far as she is concerned the incidents above related are sufficient. In regard to Mrs. Wharton, however, we may say that she, growing tired of the comparatively solitary existence which she had led after her husband's death, gradually drifted into a circle of acquaintances which in the heyday of her prosperity she would have scorned. Among these she met more than one familiar of early days whose face she now remembered, although she had forgotten them while she was the possessor of the gilded drawing-room. They were willing to forget and forgive her pride in the past; and she was willing to accept their invitations to tea and whist.

One of the leading personages among these new or resumed acquaintances was a



Mr. Habberwick, a draper ; and, in his way, a flourishing and substantial man. It is true he was stout, bald, and shoppy in his conversation ; but he remembered Mrs. Wharton when she was young and engaging ; he dearly loved a rubber, and he was a widower.

His establishment, as he called his shop, was situated in one of the chief thoroughfares of Millvale ; and his domestic affairs were presided over by his sister, an unmarried shrew, with an insatiable appetite for gossip respecting the people of the neighbourhood from whose society, as a shopkeeper's sister, she was shut out. In order to gratify this appetite, she readily endured Mrs. Wharton's affectations of refinement, and her lamentations over the greatness that had departed, invited her to tea, and accepted her invitations in return.

But by-and-by Mr. Habberwick began to call upon Mrs. Wharton unaccompanied by

his sister. He showed his friendship for her also by informing her when he had a particularly choice sample of goods at a particularly low rate ; and, finally, these delicate attentions culminated in his sending in a silk dress piece as a present.

“What a piece of impertinence !” cried Charlotte, when she saw the parcel. “You will send it back of course, will you not mamma ?”

“Send it back ? No, indeed, I shall not, Charlotte. Why should I send it back ?” and Mrs. Wharton handled the silk admiringly.

“It is a great liberty for such a man to send you a present.”

“Perhaps it is and perhaps it is not ; that is a matter of opinion, and Mr. Habberwick is an old friend.”

“He is a very vulgar and commonplace man, and I wonder that you can endure him. I did not know that he was a friend until recently.”

“Vulgar and commonplace, is he? Oh, indeed! Very much more vulgar and commonplace than the people you associate with at Heather Street; and, as to your not knowing he was a friend, why, you don’t know everything. Circumstances may have interfered with our intercourse, but that is no proof that the friendship did not exist.”

“But, dear mamma, you do not seriously intend to accept his present?”

“I most certainly do, Charlotte, and I regret that my intention does not meet with your approval. But I suppose I may judge for myself.”

“Do you imagine Miss Habberwick knows that he has sent it?”

“I don’t imagine anything about it!” retorted Mrs. Wharton pettishly.


“You must see, mamma,” said Charlotte, with the tears in her eyes, “what this man means by his odious attentions. You surely

will not encourage any such foolish presumption."

"Yes, I know what he means," said Mrs. Wharton. "He means to be kind to me, and my own daughter grudges me the little pleasures—and they are little enough—that remain to me. She would like me to live the life of an oyster, and never see any one and never go out." And the poor persecuted saint wiped her eyes and sighed.

Charlotte saw that expostulation would be of no avail. She knew her mother too well to believe that if she were flattered by the draper's attentions, as she very evidently was, she would be induced to check them by any amount of reasoning or persuasion; and so Charlotte could only look on at the progress of affairs pained and helpless.

The days and weeks sped, and at last June, 1849, arrived. Returning from a round of calls, late one afternoon, Charlotte was both surprised and annoyed to find Mr.



Habberwick in the house. Mrs. Wharton displayed no little confusion, and after a futile attempt to seem unconcerned, left the draper and Charlotte alone.

"Pardon me, Miss Wharton," said Mr. Habberwick, seeing that Charlotte was about to follow her mother; "but I should like a few words with you."

"Very good, sir," returned Charlotte, drawing herself up to her full height, and giving Mr. Habberwick a look which made him wince. "Please be as brief as possible."

"I trust we shall be good friends in the future, Miss Wharton, though I have not thought from your manner that you particularly liked me."

"Really, sir, if you have any communication to make I must ask you to make it. I don't see that my liking you or disliking you is of the smallest moment."

Charlotte spoke haughtily, and with an appearance of indifference which she was far

from feeling. As soon as she had entered the room she had learned, intuitively, that her fears respecting her mother were about to be realized.

“But,” said Mr. Habberwick, discomposed by her manner, “it does matter whether—whether members of one family are agreeable with one another or not. I’m sure you will admit that they ought to be as pleasant with each other as possible.”

“Certainly ; but as we are not in that position, I do not see the point of your remark.”

“But if we are about to become so ? There are more unlikely things.”

“Sir ! what do you mean ?”

“Well, not to beat about the bush,” said Mr. Habberwick, “I mean that I have asked Mrs. Wharton to become my wife.”

“And she has said—— ?”

“Yes.”

Without another word Charlotte turned

on her heel and left Mr. Habberwick standing in the middle of the room alone.

She went up to her room, leaving the happy lover to remain in the house or to let himself out as he thought best. She was mortified beyond expression by what she, somewhat unreasonably, regarded as a slight upon her dead father's memory; and she was grieved to think that, for the sake of the comfortable income which Mr. Habberwick derived from his calicos and silks, Mrs. Wharton should accept his hand. She was still pursuing the train of such unpleasant reflections when she heard a loud knocking at the front door. Opening it, she saw Miss Molly Fry, apparently greatly excited.

"Oh, Miss Wharton," cried Molly, "Hiram Greg's come back from Australia, an' his mother's sent Fred up to tell us."

CHAPTER X.

HIRAM IN ENGLAND AGAIN.

As was quite natural, Charlotte did not feel the intense interest in the news brought by Miss Molly that Miss Molly herself displayed. Her mind was at the time occupied by concerns which appeared to touch her much more nearly ; and after Miss Molly's departure, Hiram Greg's return was soon forgotten.

On the following Sunday afternoon she attended Heather Street as usual. It was customary, when the teaching in the several classes came to an end, for the whole school to be gathered together in the chapel for a short service prior to dismissal. Charlotte

had brought up her class to its appointed place, when she noticed a stranger standing beside the superintendent's desk. Not above the middle height, yet broad-shouldered and of a build indicative of considerable physical strength, with a determined mouth, thick black hair, lined here and there with grey, and a complexion bronzed by exposure to sun and weather—such was the man she saw. His glance wandered round the old building, and from face to face, and his eyes moistened and his lips were tightly compressed, as if the look brought back recollections of another time.

It must be Hiram Greg, thought Charlotte; but yet she could hardly believe him to be identical with the sallow, anxious young man whom she had last seen a prisoner in the dock of the Liverpool court. He looked older; but, of course, seven years would naturally leave their marks upon a man, although he might still be under thirty.

He was well, even elegantly dressed ; that was not marvellous taken in connection with what she had heard of his success ; but there was something about him, even as he stood there looking round the old chapel, which she would not have expected—an air of refinement, which seemed to stamp him as one of nature's gentlemen. Charlotte smiled to herself as this idea crossed her mind, and thought upon what a slight foundation she was building an estimate of his character.

Some of the younger children were at this time filing in from a small vestry to take their places with the rest, when a little toddling fellow caught his foot on the projecting support of a form, and falling, cut his forehead. His cries drew all eyes upon him, and in a moment Charlotte was by his side, and in another moment was holding him in her arms, pressing her handkerchief to his wound and soothing him with softly spoken words. But his cries continued and

she took him in her arms and carried him to the door, accompanied by his sister, a year or two older than himself. He was not a pretty child and he was not clean; but there was no sign of shrinking from him in Miss Wharton's manner, and she acted quietly and quickly so as to cause as little disturbance as possible.

"Dawson," said Hiram Greg, speaking to the superintendent, who was at his desk waiting to announce the hymn.

"Well?"

"Was that Miss Wharton?"

"Ay, lad. Who else could it be?"

"I shouldn't have thought she would have done that for such a child."

"Eh, my lad, tha doesn't know her. We expect her to do aught 'at's good an' kind to onybody 'at needs it. Tha'd best not cast ony doubt on her goodness i' th' hearin' o' them lasses. They'd be fit to tear thi i' pieces."

"I saw little of her," returned Hiram apologetically, "and perhaps I misjudged her. Besides, I hear that she has changed since I was in Millvale."

Dawson Schofield made no further remark at the time, and the school was closed.

In the meanwhile Charlotte had taken the child to his home in an adjacent street, and returned for the concluding prayer. Even when the time for separating came her girls seemed loth to leave her, and several of them clustered around her, making arrangements for a class during the week, and giving her information respecting one or two who were absent through illness.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said Dawson Schofield, advancing to the group with Hiram Greg at his side. "These lasses will hardly ever let yo' go if yo'll stop wi' 'em, Miss Wharton; but I want to introduce Mr. Greg to you."

"Thank you, Mr. Schofield," replied

Charlotte. "I shall be at liberty in a moment. You understand," she added, speaking to the girls, "about the sewing-class for Thursday; and as to the other matter, if Sarah Bates and Martha Bradshaw will walk up with me we can make arrangements."

Upon this the young women bid her good afternoon and left, with the exception of the two whose names she had specially mentioned, who went to wait for her at the door with beaming faces, delighted with the prospect of a walk and a talk as a conclusion to the Sunday's work.

"That's the way with her allus," Dawson explained to Hiram. "She has allus so mich to say to 'em, an' they've allus so mich to say to her, that they find it hard to separate. Yo' should hear 'em talk abeaut her i' th' weyvin'-shed when they've a minute to spare; an' if yo' were to follow two on 'em up th' street for twenty yards

yo'd be sure to hear her name mentioned. Ther' isn't one on 'em 'at wouldn't lay her life deawn for Miss Wharton. An' oo desarves it," Dawson said emphatically, "oo desarves it, for oo's been a good friend to 'em sin' oo came to Heather Street."

Mr. Schofield's eulogium was cut short by Charlotte advancing and holding out her hand.

"I am glad to see you back in Millvale, Mr. Greg," she said, with quiet frankness. "It must be a great pleasure to you to see your native place and all your friends again."

"Thank you, Miss Wharton," said Hiram. "It is a very great pleasure."

He felt somewhat constrained in her presence, which irresistibly brought to his mind, as his presence brought to hers, remembrances fraught with pain; but the calm simplicity of her manner quickly banished this feeling; and he was not sorry

that Dawson Schofield had insisted upon making them acquainted. In his eyes she was as greatly changed as she had thought him since they last saw each other. Then she was standing only upon the verge of womanhood ; now she was in the very pride and beauty of her life. Then she appeared by her very nature not less than by her station to be separated from him and such as he ; now she seemed to be near to all through the power of a gracious sympathy.

“It would be presumption in me,” she said, “to offer you welcome to Heather Street ; but I can assure you that you have not been forgotten, and that your name has been a familiar word since I came here.”

“I didn’t think I should be forgotten,” said Hiram, his lips twitching as if with a sudden spasm. “And I am glad,” he added, slowly, “not to be altogether disappointed.”

“Do you remain long in England ?” said

Charlotte, changing the subject, seeing she had touched a sensitive point.

“Not very long, but the exact time of my return I do not know. It will depend upon a variety of considerations. It will be about three months.”

It was not until after she had left him, and recalled his manner and his speech, that Charlotte noticed the absence of any of the peculiarities of the Lancashire dialect. This point, however, occurred to her mind as she walked home, and was linked with several other reflections which would not, in the nature of things, have been displeasing to Hiram could he have been made acquainted with what was passing in her mind. She thought, for instance, that his eyes were fine and expressive, and that his self-reliant bearing was just adapted to the life of a pioneer in a new land. And her imagination wandered away to that new land, and pictured the life that was passed there—a

life amid primeval forests and trackless plains, as yet unsubdued by man to his own uses—a life in the free, pure air, as yet untainted by the breath of over-crowded multitudes, unburdened by the cry of famishing thousands—a life devoted, consciously or unconsciously, to preparing the way for millions yet unborn to live in plenty and in peace. And she thought, seeing that the future grows out of the present, as a tree out of the seed, how important it was that the men who took part in founding a nation should be genuine men, strong in physical, and not less strong in moral, health—men to whom posterity could look back with pride, and who would transmit to their most distant descendants noble traditions, worthy to be borne in mind. And she thought, if she might judge from appearances and first impressions, that Hiram Greg would not fall far short in the qualities most desirable.

And Hiram thought as much of her as she did of him. Indeed, it would have been difficult for him to have done otherwise while he remained among the Heather Street folk. Her praises were sung and her opinions quoted on every side. But had this not been the case Hiram would not have forgotten the little episode of the wounded child, nor the sound of her voice, nor the charm of her manner. All these dwelt in his memory, and he had no wish that they should depart.

Miss Molly Fry was at the garden gate when Charlotte passed up the street.

“Ha’ yo’ seen him?”

“Seen whom?” returned Charlotte.

“Why, Hiram Greg, to be sure,” said Miss Molly, as if she thought the question superfluous.

“Yes, I saw him at Heather Street.”

“Did yo’ speak to him?”

“Yes, Mr. Schofield introduced us.”

“And what did yo’ think on him?”

“I saw so little of him,” said Charlotte, smiling at her friend’s eagerness, “that I had hardly an opportunity to form an opinion.”

“I should ha’ made up my mind if I’d only spoken ten words to him. But come in. Bridget wants to speak to yo’.” And Miss Molly led the way down the path. “Oo says oo doesn’t know what to think abeaut him yet,” exclaimed Miss Molly to her sister, “an’ I tell’t her I should ha’ knowed what I thought o’ ony mon if I’d had th’ same chance.”

“I were fair capped wi’ him,” said Miss Fry, “fair capped! Why, when he left here he were nobbut a Lancashire lad; neaw he’s a gentleman.”

“Yo’ know,” said the younger sister, “when he came home his mother hadn’t a room to put him into, as her heause is such a little ’un; an’ so he’s stoppin’ here, an’ he’s

just as mich a gentleman as ony lodger we ivver had : an' a deal more nor some, if we judge by th' inside, an' not by th' out."

"Be quiet, Molly, can't tha?" said Miss Fry.

"Well, he is," cried Miss Molly.

"Tha's no need to draw comparisons," replied her sister with a shake of the head. "Say what tha has to say abeaut him wi'out illudin' to others."

"Ca' this is a free country!" exclaimed Miss Molly scornfully. "Free, indeed! an' fowk are only to oppen the'r mouths to put a spoon into 'em. We should have a fine soart o' freedom if some fowk had the'r way."

"It's very well Miss Wharton knows thi by this time, an' has more sense nor to take ony notice o' what tha says. Oo'd think tha were badly trettet if oo didn't."

"Miss Molly said you wished to speak to me," Charlotte said, in order to recall the

sisters from the somewhat personal tone into which their remarks had strayed.

"We're talkin' o' givin' a party," said Miss Fry, while Miss Molly sat by trying to maintain an appearance of sullen dignity.

"Yes?" said Charlotte.

"In honour o' Hiram Greg, yo' know. We talked of axin' Doctor Wood an' Dawson Schofield, an' one or two others, thro' Heather Street."

"An' oo said yo' wouldn't come?" exclaimed Miss Molly, having kept silence as long as it was in her power to do. "She thought yo'd be above it."

"I thought naught o' th' soart!"

"Then what did tha say so for?"

"I didn't know whether yo'd care to come," said Miss Fry, ignoring her sister's question and addressing Charlotte. "Different fowk has different ways, an' what's agreeable to one isn't allus agreeable to another; an' as yo've been used to finer fowk

I thought happen yo' wouldn't feel comfortable wi' our soart. But, yo' see, it's nat'ral they should want to hear a bit abeaut what Hiram's been doin', an' if yo' like to come we'st be glad to see yo'."

"Thank you, I shall be very glad to come ! "

"Then say Wednesday, at six o'clock."

"Very good ; that will suit me admirably."

With this understanding Charlotte took her departure. When she reached her own door she noticed a retreating figure which passed out of sight at the other end of the street ; and though she saw it for a moment only, she had no doubt that it was the portly form of Mr. Habberwick.

"I knew oo'd come if oo were axed," said Miss Molly, triumphantly, as soon as Charlotte's back was turned.

"Then tha wert reet for once," returned her sister. "An' neaw oo's promised to come I'st ax Mr. Stapleton."

CHAPTER XI.

THE MISSES FRY GIVE A PARTY.

THE Misses Fry did not often give a party, and when they did, it was, as a natural consequence, looked upon as a very serious undertaking. The silver teapot and spoons had to be cleaned, the best china reached down from its usual resting-place in a cupboard in the parlour, the parlour itself to be brushed and dusted until not a speck was to be seen in any part of it ; and after all these preparations were made, both the ladies had to put on their best dresses and Miss Fry her most carefully preserved cap.

When Charlotte reached Birk's Cottage the tea table was already laid. She was one

of the earliest arrivals, only Mrs. Greg, who had been spending the day with her son, being before her. The two, with Miss Molly for company, were sitting in the parlour, enjoying the soft summer air which came in, laden with the scent of flowers, at the open windows. One of the most melancholy circumstances connected with a young man's rising in life is this—that, as he ascends, a separation in feeling, in interests, in ways of looking at things, generally takes place between him and those of his family who have not moved along with him. If he has reached a stage of culture greatly different from theirs, the disparity is felt still more acutely by both sides. Unless the young man is a prig, he is a long time before he admits the existence of the feeling of division even to himself; and when he cannot but recognize it, he perceives it with more of pain than of vanity. On the other side, too, there may be an unselfish pride in the success

of a dear one, but the fact cannot be disguised that years and change have done their work, and that henceforth the sphere to which the one has attained is an unknown realm to the other. Mrs. Greg and Hiram, without putting the matter into any definite form, had a half-consciousness that they were not, and could not be to each other what they once were. The matters that most engaged Hiram's mind were strange to his mother; the very mode of speech which had now become his habit seemed to belong to a class above her own. There was no doubt in her mind as to his affection, but she felt that since he had come back from Australia they had not so much in common as before. He was a gentleman; she was only a rough-spoken Lancashire woman; he was a fit associate for any one; it was better for her to keep among the people she had been accustomed to all her life.

“They were just talkin’ abeaut Mrs. Greg

goin' to Australia," said Molly, as Charlotte entered the room.

"And have you made up your mind to go?" asked Charlotte, turning to Mrs. Greg.

"Neaw, I don't think I have," said Mrs. Greg.

"Oh, the question is not settled yet," said Hiram, with a shake of the head, which seemed to indicate that the settlement might not be left wholly to his mother.

"It's ill transplantin' an owd tree," said Mrs. Greg. "It mightn't take root i' fresh soil, an' then what's to be done?"

"If the soil is very much better than it has been used to it ought to do well," said Hiram, with a smile. "And you're not a tree, mother; and men and women can adapt themselves as trees cannot."

"Ay, lad, that's reet enow, an' they con feel things 'at trees wouldn't."

"Yes, but out there, there would be a comfortable home, with freedom and plenty."

"That's not it; that's not it," said Mrs. Greg, a troubled expression in her face.

"Then what is?" exclaimed Miss Molly.
 "Hiram wants you to go an' to take th' childer if yo' like; an' ther's not much need to think o' fresh surroundin's where your son has made a home. It's my opinion there's summat behind all this."

"Well, if yo' will have it," said Mrs. Greg, planting her hands on her knees, and looking from one to the other, "I'll tell yo'. Hiram's a gentleman, an' I'm not a lady. He's had th' chance o' learning new ways while he wur young enow to pick 'em up; my chance is past, an' at my age I can't alter ways I've been brought up in. I should be i' his way—nay, lad, don't deny it," she pursued, noticing that Hiram was about to speak. "I'm none a foo', an' I know what I say is true; an' I shouldn't be comfortable if I thought I were standing i' my lad's light. There, that's it."

"My dear mother," said Hiram, deeply hurt, "what reason have I given you to say or fancy such things? Have I by any act or word led you to suspect that you—you to whom I owe so much—you who nursed me and worked for me, and always did the best for me that you could—would ever be in my way? And as to what anybody else may say or think, why, they had better not breathe a word of the kind to me. They'd soon wish they hadn't."

"Neaw, lad, don't run off wi' a wrong idea. Tha's said naught to make me think thou'rt ashamed o' thi mother. A' th' same, I feel what I've said. Don't yo' think I'm reet, Miss Wharton?"

"It is very difficult for a third person to give an opinion on a matter of feeling," said Charlotte, reluctant to take part in a discussion of such a delicate nature.

"He'll get wed some day, yo' know," said Mrs. Greg, turning to Miss Molly, "an' he'll

not marry a wife 'at 'ud be content wi' me i' th' heause."

"I have no intention of marrying," said Hiram, with a heightened colour.

"Intentions come an' go," said Mrs. Greg. "Tha may intend in a month."

"I should never marry any one who would look down upon you, anyhow," said Hiram. "She wouldn't be good enough for me if she could do that."

The arrival of Dawson Schofield and Doctor Wood put a stop to this topic for the present. Mr. Stapleton quickly followed. Miss Fry brewed the tea, and, seating herself at the head of the table, invited her guests to take their places. In subjects of a more general kind the slight uneasiness left by the conversation which had occurred was lost, and ample justice was done to the various good things which Miss Fry had provided.

Tea being finished, the company settled

down to friendly chat ; Hiram, as the lion of the occasion, being expected to bear the greatest share in the general entertainment.

“ I don’t rightly understand,” said Doctor Wood, “ what yo’ did after yo’ left that Mr. Hutchinson. Did yo’ go on a explorin’ expedition ? ”

“ In one sense we did—but haven’t you seen my letters ? ” said Hiram.

“ Some on ’em ; not all.”

“ I’m afraid Miss Wharton would be little interested in hearing about our roughing it in the bush,” said Hiram.

“ I should be delighted to hear, I should indeed,” said Charlotte. “ I have been hoping you would tell us something about your life in Australia. It is always more interesting to hear of such things from people who have direct knowledge and experience than to read about them in books.”

Mr. Stapleton and the rest expressing themselves to the same effect, Hiram said,

“There is really very little to tell ; nothing new ; nothing that has not been described many times. When Blundel and I left Boorunga—that was Mr. Hutchinson’s place, where I was shepherd for a year,” he explained, turning to Charlotte——

“An’ where yo’ saved his life,” put in Mrs. Greg, anxious that such a point should not be lost upon Miss Wharton.

“——we had five hundred sheep, besides waggons to carry provisions, tents, and other miscellaneous articles. Our object was to find a suitable piece of country to take up. Blundel, my partner, knew far more of what ought to be done than I did at that time, and his knowledge was of very great value. There was plenty of land to choose from, and we were not long before we reached unappropriated country and made our selection. We worked hard, taking turn and turn about minding the sheep and building a hut to live in and a

shed for the wool. Of course we had taken tools and a man or two to help ; but we often found ourselves without things we wanted, and were obliged to contrive a substitute as there was no shop handy. And, as I said, we worked hard—men do work hard when they are working for themselves in a solitude ; but we slept soundly, and the work prevented us from feeling lonely.”

“An’ who cooked ?” interpolated Molly, who had been listening with open mouth.

“Those who were left at home,” said Hiram.

“An’ what did they cook ?”

“Mutton and damper, damper and mutton. Sometimes we would shoot a bird or a kangaroo. Kangaroo tail makes a fine stew.”

“Gracious!” exclaimed Molly, “I couldn’t fancy eating such a beast as that.”

“Perhaps not,” returned Hiram. “But a bush appetite is not fastidious.”

"Did black men live near?" asked Doctor Wood.

"Sometimes we saw them, and do yet; but we have had no serious trouble with them, and I am glad to say we have not had to fight."

"I've allus understood," put in Dawson Schofield, "that one great drawback to sheep farmin' were want o' water. I wish we could send abeaut half o' our Millvale rain over to Australia."

"Yes," said Hiram, "water is of great importance, and we could not forget that in choosing our run, and we have a very good creek bounding it on one side. We have never been really hard put to it by drought or our sheep wouldn't have prospered as they have done. As I said, we began with five hundred; now we have seven times that number; and every year, leaving out what we buy, the increase is proportionately great. We have gone on the principle of

spending little on ourselves, and putting all our available cash into stock and improvements."

"You and your partner will soon be rich men if you go on as you have begun," said Mr. Stapleton. "Won't your land be overstocked?"

"Not for some time to come," said Hiram. "An Australian run is a different thing from a farm at home. Why, we have secured thirty thousand acres; and when that is fully stocked we shall be tolerably well off. Blundel talks of returning to England, but he puts off doing so from year to year. If he does not, the necessity may arise either for a separation or for taking up more land jointly."

"Did you not sometimes find your life very dull, so far removed from civilization, and with only the affairs of your own farm to occupy your attention?" said Charlotte.

"We should, no doubt, have found it in-

supportable if your description were correct ; but I am happy to say we were not far removed from civilization, and that we had numberless other things to engage our minds."

"I fear I am slightly obtuse, Mr. Greg, for I don't see your drift."

"We had the advantages of a university," said Hiram, enjoying Miss Wharton's evident surprise.

"A university !" she exclaimed.

"Have you read Carlyle's 'Lectures on Heroes' ?"

"No."

"Well, Carlyle says, 'The true university of these days is a collection of books.'"

"Ah," said Charlotte, "now I understand."

"We took care not to be without books," continued Hiram, "and in the evenings we spent many hours over them. Blundel is an Oxford man, and he has helped me more

than I can tell. Can you imagine us seated at a rough table, in a log hut, working away as if all our prospects depended upon our progress?"

"I can, whether Miss Wharton can or not," said Mr. Stapleton. "I know what you could do in that way before you left."

"I don't know at a'," said Miss Molly, "how yo' get on wi'out women. It isn't good for man to be alone, and yo' ought to be wed."

"It would be too rough a life for—for some women," returned Hiram, looking at Charlotte, and bringing his sentence to a sudden termination.

"That," said Charlotte, "would depend upon the character of the women who tried it—whether they regarded themselves as ornaments only, or were ready and able to make themselves of real use."

"Exactly," said Hiram. "There are ladies who take kindly to the primitive

ways of the wilderness ; and will ride and shoot as well as any man. Everything is different out there from what it is at home ; there is less conventionalism ; less observance of the artificial rules of society ; and above all, the way seems open for the fulfilment of any legitimate ambition. Ours is a young colony yet ; but it will be important some day ; and there is no reason that I can see why any man with sufficient brains should not rise to the highest position."

"We may live to see you in the colonial parliament," said Mr. Stapleton, half in jest.

"You may," said Hiram, wholly serious. "I shan't want to be making money and doing nothing else all my life."

"I am glad to hear you say that, Mr. Greg," said Charlotte, with a glance which set Hiram's pulse beating at a quicker rate.

The party broke up at an early hour ; and Mrs. Greg, who had watchfully noted every look and word that had passed during the

evening, remarked to Miss Fry, as she tied her bonnet-strings—

“I shouldn’t wonder if Hiram takes a wife back wi’ him.”

“Is he in love?” said Miss Fry, opening her eyes to their utmost extent.

“I think he is.”

Doctor Wood and Dawson Schofield walked home together.

“Would oo have him?” said Schofield, without indicating to whom he referred by any more direct reference.

“If he axes her,” replied Wood, which showed that he needed no explanation.

“Then,” said Schofield, “we’d better look out for another teacher for them lasses at Heather Street.”

CHAPTER XII.

MISS MOLLY BRINGS IN SOME NEWS.

HIRAM had so many old friends to see, so many old memories to recall, so many persons to talk to who were desirous of hearing of the ways and conditions of existence at the antipodes, so many items of business to attend to in the prospect of his return, that two months [of his necessarily brief stay seemed to have fled without half of his purposes being accomplished.


The point that caused him the most serious anxiety arose from the necessity for making provision for his mother. She steadily adhered to her determination not to leave Millvale. The feeling which she had half revealed in response to Miss Molly's

query was the real source of this firmness ; but seeing that any insistance upon that side of the question caused her son sincere sorrow, she invented all manner of excuses and difficulties, which Hiram contended with in vain. She had the children to bring up ; she dreaded the voyage ; she feared the loneliness of the life in the bush ; she could not bear, at her time of life, to leave the places and people who had been familiar from her youth—these, and half a score more considerations, she brought forward over and over again, until Hiram saw that it was hopeless to try to persuade her to alter her mind. Under the circumstances, therefore, he could do nothing better than arrange that she should never be in want ; and having provided for the regular payment of an allowance sufficient for her modest wants, he could do no more than cheer her and himself with the hope of another visit in the years to come.

But there was something more which made the days pass quickly by. Through Charlotte's connection with Heather Street, and her friendship with the Misses Fry, he was often brought into contact with her. While he was with her he seemed to be under a spell; when he was away from her he frequently caught himself speculating as to when he would next see her. The thought of returning to Blundel and the sheep had become strangely distasteful, and, when he did think of it, he was apt to wander away from his remembrance of the realities he had left behind in Australia to visions of a home brightened by the presence in which he had learnt to find such happiness. In short, Hiram Greg was in love, and was experiencing all the delights, and was being tormented by all the fears and questionings, proper to such a condition.

Mrs. Greg, as we are aware, had seen that such was the case, with quick maternal

instinct, before any other person had noticed the symptoms which every man thinks he can hide; but others were not long in reaching the same conclusion. Mysterious whisperings took place at Heather Street, and at the close of the school the girls, who, hitherto, had generally been ready to walk home with Charlotte, showed a due appreciation of the situation by leaving her alone, when it became only an act of courtesy on Hiram's part to accompany her at least as far as Birk's Cottage. During these walks, as well as on other occasions when opportunity offered, Hiram talked of his adventures, of his struggles, of the books he had read, of the prospects before him, and found in Charlotte a willing and appreciative listener. They were happy, happy times, clouded only by the thought that soon he would be separated from her, leaving her behind in Millvale while he crossed the sea once more and again buried himself in the



bush, which he began to think more solitary than he had deemed it while in its midst.

One day he had seen Charlotte to her door and had returned to Birk's Cottage with the sound of her voice still lingering in his ears, and flinging himself into an easy-chair in the parlour, lost himself in a reverie. He had not been in long when Miss Fry entered the room and seated herself opposite to him. She watched him quietly for a few minutes, and then muttered to herself, "I mut do it."

"Hem!" she began, by way of attracting his attention.

"Oh, Miss Fry," he said, looking up, "I had not heard you come in."

"I've had a visitor this afternoon," said Miss Fry.

"Anybody that I know?" asked Hiram, without any great display of interest.

"Ay, yo' know her."

"A lady, then?"

“ Well, a woman, onyway.”

“ Just so ; I suppose there’s not much difference.”

“ There’s one subject,” said Miss Fry, who did not appear quite at her ease, “ ’at we’ve not said much abeaut sin’ yo’ came back.”

Here Hiram looked up, surprised by Miss Fry’s tone. He knew what subject she alluded to, and wondered what it could have to do with the visitor of whom Miss Fry had spoken. But he made no remark, and she continued,—

“ It’s a unpleasant subject to yo’, an’ it’s not a very agreeable one to us.”

“ Then why refer to it ? Where is the good of harrowing our feelings concerning what is past and gone ? I’ve had enough of it in the past ; it is better to forget.”

Hiram’s brow was contracted as he spoke. Miss Fry’s words woke recollections strangely at variance with the tenor of the reflections which she had interrupted.

“We can’t forget altogether, lad,” said the little lady, shaking her head. “Things will come up neaw an’ again; an’ if we con have summat pleasant, that’s happened later, to put on th’ top o’ what’s disagreeable, so to speak, an’ help to cover it up, it’s a’ th’ better. It were Helen’s mother ’at came this afternoon. Oo came to ax me if I’d tell’t thi summat ’at Helen said afore oo went away—summat ’at oo left for thee.”

“She did remember me, then?” said Hiram; and as he spoke some pity for the life that had been so cruelly blighted stirred in his heart.

“As near as I con call her words to mind, as her mother tell’t ’em to me at th’ time, an’ repeated ’em this afternoon,” said Miss Fry, “poor Helen said, ‘If ever he comes back, tell him I was not good enow for him; tell him I’m very sorry; ask him not to think about me, but just to forget me as if

I nivver lived.' That's what oo said ; an' neaw I'st not talk ony more abeaut her."

Hiram sat, shading his eyes with his hand, and was silent for some moments.

"Henderson is still in Millvale?" he said, at length, without looking up.

"Ay, he's still here, a brazen face!" said Miss Fry, with more than usual vehemence.

"I had desperate thoughts at one time," said Hiram, after another pause ; "and it was perhaps well that many thousands of miles divided us, or I might have done something which would have cost me my life. I should not like to meet him even now," he added, clenching his hands. "I could hardly answer for the consequences."

"Leave him to God an' his conscience," said Miss Fry, solemnly. "He seems prosperous an' happy, an' fowk either don't know of his sin, or they o'erlook it because he's rich ; but ther' mut be times when Helen's white face rises up afore him, an'

makes his blood run cold. It mut be awful to be haunted by such a ghost ! Providence won't let him escape, though he seems to flourish like a green bay-tree. Eh, lad, th' ways o' Providence are dark sometimes ; but his sin 'll find him out."

Hiram did not reply, and Miss Fry left him to pursue his reflections.

About the middle of the week Hiram received a letter from Blundel, which he had been expecting for some little time. But, though he had been looking for a letter, its contents were none the less a cause of surprise.

"After you left," wrote Blundel, among other matters, with which it is not necessary to trouble the reader, "after you left, the place seemed very different, and the change that had come over it, or over me, was not a change for the better. I did not know until I was left alone what your companionship had been to me. There are the books here.

still, of course ; but when I try to settle down to read I often catch myself recalling the evenings we spent together storing up or discussing the wisdom which our betters have left us in their pages. And when I feel moped, as I often do, I dread the time which must come, sooner or later, when you will neither be able nor willing to bestow much of your society upon me. Then my thoughts turn towards the old home. The old folks beg me to return. I think I have almost expiated the faults of my youth ; and you need not be surprised if, when you come back, I am unable to resist the longing which draws me to my home. . . . The house is progressing satisfactorily. The roof is already on, and if you should bring back a wife with you—and there are many more unlikely things, old fellow—there will be a rather more fitting place for her reception than this old hut. Perhaps you and she—the hypothetical she—will not object to a

grim old bachelor occupying a corner of it until the attractions of the old country prove too strong. . . . I have written this letter in snatches, and since I wrote the last preceding lines I have received my English letters, and they contain sad news, which determines me to hasten home as soon as you return. My father is dead. Do not shorten your visit ; but prepare your mind for working the run alone. I am richer than I expected or deserved ; and you can pay me my share of our joint venture when convenient. We who have worked together, and lived together so long, are not likely to quarrel about terms. But I cannot write more. Would that I had seen the old man once more before the end. Strange that he has been buried for months, while I only now hear of his departure."

Hiram naturally read this communication with feelings of a mingled kind. The references to his possible marriage thrilled him

with a strange delight, and on this portion of his friend's epistle he lingered longest. Though sympathizing with his friend in the trouble that had befallen him, he was in a condition of mind which made it inevitable that he should dwell most upon the circumstances which seemed to point in the direction of the fulfilment of the hopes which he had begun to entertain. But one point was clear—he could not, in fairness to his partner, remain long in England, and he must either test Charlotte's feelings at once or abandon all thought of her.

During his stay at Birk's Cottage, Mrs. Wharton had been sufficiently gracious to invite him to spend an evening with her and her daughter. He had a shrewd suspicion that that lady, notwithstanding the refinement of her nature, of which she had told him, would not feel very acutely a separation from Charlotte, provided there was some one to take her place in ministering to the good

lady's comforts. As to whether Charlotte's sense of duty would allow her to leave her mother he was more dubious. He was doubtful, also, even if Charlotte looked favourably upon his suit, whether Mrs. Wharton would be willing to go out to Australia ; but he was not doubtful as to the undesirability of her doing so. He had no wish to be permanently burdened with such a mother-in-law. Mrs. Wharton was in the way. As he did not see, however, how he could ask Charlotte to leave her mother alone, and as he must have Charlotte if he could win her consent, he decided, if needs be, to accept the mother-in-law and make the best of her.

From the fact that he was debating this mother-in-law question the sagacious reader will have inferred that he had not heard of the advances of Mr. Habberwick. It is needless to say that he would not have been ignorant on a point of such interest had Miss Molly been better informed. That lady was

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destined to set his mind at rest on this point at least.

"Eh, Bridget, eh, Hiram, I ha' some news for yo'," she exclaimed, bursting into the little parlour upon her return from a shopping expedition.

"Tha's allus some news or other," said her sister, with a touch of quiet contempt, "an' it as often turns out fause as true."

"But this is true, ivvery word of it," said Miss Molly, too much excited to do battle according to her wont. "Yo' know Habberwick, th' draper, don't yo', Hiram?"

"Oh, yes, I know him," said Hiram, smiling at her eagerness.

"He's goin' to be wed."

Miss Molly delivered herself of this brief sentence with a look which seemed to say, "Wasn't that a staggerer?"

"Well, that's naught to go into a fit abeaut," said Miss Fry, "though he is an old foo'."

"And why shouldn't he, if he likes?" said Hiram.

"Wait a bit!" said Miss Molly, with an inclination of the head signifying that the most surprising portion of her news remained untold. "Who do yo' think it's to? Con yo' guess that?"

"Onybody we know?" asked Miss Fry, beginning to show a little interest.

"Yis," said Molly, with another slow nod.

"One of his shop-girls," suggested Hiram.

"Nay," said Miss Fry, "it can't be one o them. We don't know 'em. It can't be Miss Crimpton," she suggested, suddenly struck with the idea.

"Neaw, it's not Miss Crimpton. Yo'd nivver guess, so I'll tell yo'—it's Mrs. Wharton."

"Mrs. Wharton!" exclaimed Miss Fry and Hiram simultaneously.

"I thought yo'd be surprised," said Miss

Molly, with the air of one who has vindicated her character.

"But how does tha know it isn't a' a tale?" said Miss Fry.

"Miss Crimpton tell't me, an' it's a' over th' town by this time. Ther's no mistake abeaut it. Habberwick tell't his sister last neet, an' oo made a fine to do! Oo kept his heause, yo' know," Miss Molly explained for Hiram's benefit, "an' oo said oo wouldn't stop to be turned out; an' so this mornin' oo went to Miss Crimpton's, an' there oo's lodgin' till oo makes up her mind what to do."

"An' when is it to come off?" asked Miss Fry.

"They say in abeaut a month, but I couldn't get to know th' exact day."

"Will yo' go to th' picnic on Saturday?" said Miss Fry, with a curious glance at Hiram.

"I think I shall," he replied, returning

the look ; and, putting on his hat, he went out whistling as unconcernedly as he could ; while the two sisters fell to work to discuss the coming event in all its possible bearings.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PICNIC IN CRAGVALE.

A PICNIC was not an every-day event in the lives of the Heather Street folks, but about twice during the summer the teachers and the elder scholars (male and female) made up a party for an excursion to some attractive spot in the neighbourhood.

The place chosen on this occasion was a lovely valley lying among the moors several miles away. To persons who all the week long had been breathing the hot, dust-laden air of a factory—and of such the party was chiefly composed—the clear atmosphere and the rustling trees of Cragvale were sources of the purest pleasure. Treading its sward,


dappled with leafy shadows, listening to its purling brook, it was possible to forget the din of machinery and the beating of the engines which were all too familiar; down in its wooded depths not even a single tall chimney was to be seen, and one seemed to be shut out from the bustle, and the hurry, and the toil of the towns that clustered round. In such a place the sound of laughter seemed fitting and appropriate, and the Heather Street people, when out for a merry-making, were not afraid to let their voices be heard.

On a patch of level turf alongside the stream a number of the younger men were enjoying a game of cricket; higher up another group were dancing to the music of a fiddle; others were occupied by various sports, while the elderly people, who were too stiff in the limbs for any such active exercises, were rejoicing in the sunshine falling upon them through the swaying

boughs, admiring the tints with which nature was dyeing the leaves and bracken, as a compensation for the loss of their first verdure.

Hiram took his share in the cricket for a time, but, being out of practice, did not cut a very remarkable figure. A visible pre-occupation and absence of mind did not tend, either, to increase his effectiveness; and a loud outcry was raised when he missed a good catch through having his attention diverted by the persons who were dancing within sight of the wicket. It was in fact a relief to him when the game was finished, and he declined the invitation to take part in a second.

Charlotte, clothed in a light muslin, her face shaded by a broad-brimmed hat, was resting at the foot of a tree when he approached. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright with exercise, and she was laughingly protesting to two of her girls



that she could not dance any more. In conformity with the custom which had been tacitly adopted, the girls left her as soon as they saw Hiram coming towards her.

"You are tired?" he said, bending over her.

"A little; I do not care to dance any more at present," she replied, without raising her head.

"Too tired to walk? You may be chilly if you remain here."

"Thank you," she said, placing her hand in the one he held out to assist her.

"This valley," he said, "strongly reminds me of one in which I rested just before I encountered Mr. Hutchinson when I first went to Boorunga, only there there were no autumn tints, but numberless parrots and 'keets screaming among the trees, and flashing here and there—bits of brilliant colour."

"How strange all that must have seemed in contrast with England!" said Charlotte.

"Not half so strange," said Hiram, "as that I should be talking to you about it here."

"But why should this seem strange?" said Charlotte, walking quickly on through the rustling grass.

"Do you remember the trial when you gave evidence against me?"

"How can I ever forget it? But may we not let the dead past bury its dead?"

"I do not wish to hurt you by my reference to that time; only to contrast that time with the present. It was upon your evidence that I was in reality convicted, and I knew that it would be so if I were convicted at all."

"Mr. Greg, is this generous?" she said, pausing in her walk, and turning suddenly upon him.

"Charlotte—pardon me—Miss Wharton, bear with me one moment. At my trial you spoke words that sounded to me almost like

the doom of death ; now I ask you for one word that will be as the gift of life."

They were now far away from the rest of the party, and were secure from prying eyes. Charlotte rested one hand upon the gnarled trunk of an oak, and stood unable to speak. Hiram's tones and the tremor of his whole frame told her what his words had not yet conveyed ; and she hung her head to hide the blushes with which the gladness of her heart suffused her cheeks.

"Do you consider me a very desperate criminal ?" he asked.

"No," she returned, so low that he could hardly catch the word.

"Nor very deeply disgraced by my imprisonment ?"

"It is no disgrace to suffer if you are innocent—as I believe you were."

"Thank you," said Hiram. After a few seconds' pause : "Charlotte, for I will use the word now I know you do not believe

me a branded man, I have learnt to love you, to love you with my whole mind and strength, and not only to love, but to honour and respect you. I know I am not worthy to ask for your love in return ; I know that you are above me in a hundred ways ; but yet I have dared to hope that you would prize an honest man's true affection, and that you would share his lot."

He took the hand which hung by her side, and she let it rest in his grasp.

"Dare you trust me," he pursued, "with your future happiness—with yourself?"

She lifted her eyes and met his look and whispered—

"I dare."

A moment later their lips met, and he held her in a fast embrace.

"I feared, darling," he said, as they sauntered slowly back to the part of the valley whence the sounds of shouts and happy laughter came, "that you would

shrink from the idea of venturing with me to the other side of the world ; it seemed presumptuous to even imagine that you would care enough for me to leave so many who love you here. Besides, how do you know that I may not take you to a mere hovel far away in the wilds ? ”

“ I shall be content,” she said, with a smile expressive of the fullest confidence ; “ and I will help you to make it home.”

He looked at her with loving pride, and pressing the hand which rested on his arm, returned — “ I have worked for myself hitherto—sometimes to banish hard and bitter thoughts, sometimes with the dogged determination to make a success of what I had undertaken, sometimes with a motive a trifle better. Now I shall have an object worth working for ; and the remembrance of you, my darling, will fill me with a sevenfold energy. He would be a strange man who would not find his highest happi-

ness in ensuring the happiness of such a wife."

And so, talking as only newly betrothed lovers can talk, they walked on through the sunlight, to rejoin their friends, and a quiet, trustful joy filled their hearts.

Many meaning glances were turned upon them as they approached ; and more than one "God bless them" was muttered by the elders. They were relieved from any embarrassment by the opportune announcement, made by Dawson Schofield, that tea was waiting ; and the whole party trooped away to a farmhouse not far distant.

The walk of four miles in the twilight, from Cragvale to the town was, for two persons at least, delicious. That mysterious tacit understanding which had been come to among the girls seemed to have spread, so that they were not burdened with any superfluous company.

"What," asked Hiram, "do you sup-

pose Mrs. Wharton will say when she is told ? ”

“ I really don’t think she will have any objection to offer. She will be rather glad than otherwise. It will relieve her of a perplexity.”

“ Then this rumour that I have heard is true ? ”

“ That she is to be married ?—yes.”

“ And what did she expect you to do ? ”

“ I really cannot say ; I had not broached the subject ; and doubtless she had felt some difficulty in speaking of it to me. Of one thing I am certain—I should never have lived with her and Mr. Habberwick.”

“ Then I will speak to her as soon as possible. When is she to be married ? ”

“ In about a month.”

“ *We* must not wait a month, darling ! Within a month we must be upon the sea.”

Dawson Schofield and Doctor Wood were

jogging on behind. When they had an opportunity for a quiet word,—

“I think it’s settled,” said the latter.

“Ay,” said Schofield, “I’m sure we’st ha’ to look out for a new teacher for them lasses.”

CHAPTER XIV.

HEATHER STREET IN HOLIDAY ATTIRE.

"REALLY, my dear, I do not think it is genteel. How can it be genteel when it has been hurried forward in this manner? You ought to have made Mr. Greg wait, so as to give you time for proper preparations. You ought to have insisted upon having the thing more genteelly done."

"But, mamma, is gentility the only, or the chief, thing to be considered?"

"Ah," said Mrs. Wharton, with a doleful shake of the head, "I am afraid you will never learn to look at these affairs from the point of view of a refined mind. I have not been able to teach you to do so in all these

years, and it is not likely you will learn it among Hottentots and kangaroos. Only just over three weeks since you were engaged, and here you are to be married to-morrow! Perhaps you will know what my feelings are when you have a daughter of your own."

Mrs. Wharton shook her head again and sighed heavily, as if she could say more but would refrain. To-night she felt as if she were a martyr indeed.

The little parlour was all in confusion. Dresses and packages were scattered about, and the slightest glance would have led to the conclusion that some unusual and important event was impending. Charlotte stitched away silently for a time, and then looked up, her eyes full of tears.

"I do hope, dear mamma," she said, laying down her needle, and putting her hand upon Mrs. Wharton's knee, "that you will be happy in your—in your new home."

Her voice trembled and she could say no more.

"I have no doubt about it, Charlotte, or I should not have accepted Mr. Habberwick," returned Mrs. Wharton. "Even if he is not all that one could desire, and I do not expect him to be, because of course he is only a man, it will be better to have some one to rely upon than to be left here all alone, as I should have been, I suppose, but for him."

"And I am glad, mamma," said Charlotte, not noticing the tone of complaint in which these words were spoken, "I am glad that you approve my choice—that you like Hiram."

"Yes, my dear, Hiram is a young man that I cannot object to, as you have set your affections upon him. If I had chosen for you, I might have chosen differently; but I trust you will find him all that you expect. But, dear me, I can't stop talking

here. We shall have midnight upon us before we know where we are. I will go and see what Miss Molly is doing in the kitchen. I will say, though Miss Molly is not a refined person, she is very useful in an emergency."

"There is some one at the door," said Charlotte, and Miss Molly was heard to go along the passage and admit the visitor.

"It's Mr. Greg, I do believe," said Mrs. Wharton, listening. "I shall leave him with you."

A moment later Hiram came in, shook hands with Mrs. Wharton, and that lady retired to see what progress Miss Molly and her assistant, the old servant who had put Charlotte "in the way" of housekeeping, were making with the preparations for the morrow.

"I was right," he said, after the exchange of affectionate greetings. "The *True Briton* is loading, and will be ready to sail in a few

days. They hope, indeed, that she will be able to leave not later than the end of this week."

"How fortunate that other arrangements had not been made!" said Charlotte. "Is Captain Parker still in command?"

"No; he has been transferred to a new ship. Braidwood is now master of the *True Briton*."

"Oh, that is delightful! And you have secured passages, or berths, or whatever is the correct term?"

"Yes, my darling, I have booked a cabin. It will be a different voyage for me from my last; and, for your sake, I trust not quite so eventful. But we must run the risks of the sea."

"With you I shall not be afraid," Charlotte said, with a look which brought Hiram to her side.

"We shall go up to London to-morrow, and there wait until the *True Briton* is ready."

"Now come with me, sir, and look at a collection of the most wonderful things you ever saw."

As she spoke she led him to a table in one corner of the room, and, removing a cloth with which it was covered, displayed a number of articles of a most miscellaneous character.

"Here is a silver tea-service from Mr. and Mrs. Champley and a bracelet from Miss Champley, a beautiful Bible from Mr. Stapleton, two pieces of silk from——"

"Mr. Habberwick, I suppose?"

"Yes, from Mr. Habberwick. He must be of a forgiving nature, as I don't think I have treated him quite so well as I ought. This lovely lace handkerchief is from Miss Crimpton; this wonderful old china tea-pot and these cups and saucers are from Miss Fry and her sister, and belonged to their great-grandmother. I shan't let you examine all the things at present, and you

must be content with seeing but one more."

She took up a small case and opened it, looking from the case to Hiram with the tears standing in her eyes.

"A watch!" he exclaimed.

"A gold watch," she said, "and guess whose gift it is."

"I really cannot."

"It is from Heather Street. The girls and teachers, and I don't know how many others, have subscribed, and Dawson Schofield and half a dozen of the girls came up to-night to bring it. I don't know how I shall leave them, I don't indeed."

This reflection was too much for Charlotte's composure, and her tears flowed freely.

"Why, there's somebody else," said Hiram, "and somebody who evidently means to come in, judging from the way he knocks."

Charlotte had hardly wiped her eyes when

Miss Molly opened the door of the parlour, and, putting in her head, announced a gentleman to see Miss Wharton.

“A gentleman? Who is he? I am hardly fit to see or be seen,”—with a glance at the mirror, which showed her a pair of eyes reddened by weeping.

“Mr. Gordon, thro’ Ferringham,” said Miss Molly. “You’re right enow for onybody.”

“Oh, let him come in,” cried Charlotte, forgetting all about her eyes at the sound of Mr. Gordon’s name; and in another moment she was laughing and crying and shaking hands with the theatrical manager.

“And this,” said Mr. Gordon, turning to Hiram, “is the happy gentleman?”

“Mr. Greg,” said Charlotte, blushing.

“And permit me to say, sir, that you have won a prize,” said Mr. Gordon.

“Of that I am fully sensible,” returned Hiram; “no one could be more so.”

"I was never more disappointed in my life, sir," continued the manager, "than when Miss Wharton found it necessary to relinquish a profession of which she would have been a distinguished ornament. I had set my heart upon her success, but filial duty could not be neglected, certainly not by a lady with the heart of your future wife; and though disappointed I could only admire her more for the course she took."

"I am convinced she would do what she thought to be right whatever the sacrifice at the moment," replied Hiram, with a proud glance at Charlotte.

"I must really run away and leave you," said the subject of these remarks, "if you continue to deal in such compliments."

"No, my dear, you must do nothing of the kind," said Mr. Gordon. "Compliments are objectionable only when they are insincere, and I am sure we mean every word we say."

"How charming it is to have you here," said Charlotte. "This is a pleasure I did not expect. But everything is arranged so happily, and everybody is so good and kind, that I am quite overcome."

"You are no doubt aware, Mr. Greg, that since I made Miss Wharton's acquaintance we have kept up a correspondence—not a very frequent or regular one; but we have never altogether lost sight of each other, or been ignorant of each other's doings."

Hiram bowed to intimate that he was acquainted with this fact.

"And when I received your last letter, my dear," continued Mr. Gordon, turning to Charlotte, "telling me that you were about to be married and leave England, I determined to come and say good-bye to the most promising 'Juliet,' sir, that I ever saw."

"That was very good of you," said Charlotte. "And now that you are here you

must tell me about the people with whom my short connection with the theatre made me acquainted. First, Mrs. Gordon ?”

“She is well, very well ; and as practical and business-like as ever.”

“And the Everingtons ?”

“Mrs. Everington is with us in Ferringham. Her boy, a fine little fellow, is with her. She is known to the public as Miss de Sayne. I think I told you when we first met what I anticipated for her. Well, my expectations have been very nearly fulfilled. Her husband dragged her about from town to town, sometimes ill-treating her, almost always keeping her in want and anxiety through his lack of principle ; and two years ago he did the best thing for her that he could, and disappeared. We have not heard a word of him since.”

“And is she still acting ?” Charlotte asked.

“Oh dear, yes ! Poor Ethel, she has lost

her good looks in a great degree, and her hard experience has robbed her of ambition. Perhaps it is as well that such is the case. She now plays old women's parts, and earns enough to keep herself in tolerable comfort, and to educate her boy. The skeleton in her cupboard is the dread of her husband's reappearance, and the fear that he will take her child away from her."

"Surely, he would not be such a brute as that!" cried Charlotte, indignantly.

"We must hope that he'll not have the chance. But now," said Mr. Gordon, suddenly changing the subject, "about to-morrow, who is to give you away?"

Hiram and Charlotte exchanged glances, and, with a smile, Charlotte said—

"I really do not know. We intend it to be a very quiet and unpretentious affair, and we have been so busy that that part of the ceremony has not been provided for. There is no one," she continued, becoming grave,

and speaking very softly, "who would naturally take the place."

"Then may I have the privilege? I am a poor substitute, I know," said Mr. Gordon, "but I will fill your father's place as well as I can."

Before taking his leave, Mr. Gordon produced from a package which he had left outside the room a splendidly bound and illustrated copy of Shakespeare's plays, and added it to the other bridal gifts upon the side table.

Heather Street never attained the dignity of a peal of bells. Had it possessed such an appendage, there is little doubt a merry tune would have been flung down upon Millvale on the occasion of the wedding of Charlotte Wharton and Hiram Greg. Charlotte had said the affair was to be a very quiet one, but her friends seemed to entertain a different opinion. When the bridal party arrived the chapel was full—fuller

than it had ever been, excepting on the annual singing day and such extraordinary times. The communion table was laden with flowers ; and her girls, dressed in white, with baskets of flowers in their hands, were present in great force. Mrs. Greg and Doctor Wood were there, and even Mr. and Mrs. Briggs looked on from the gallery.

Tears and smiles held a divided reign—tears for the loss of a valued friend which so many in that assemblage were about to sustain ; smiles called forth by unselfish sympathy with her happiness. But when Charlotte appeared, one and all made an effort to hide the tears, that her joy might not be dimmed, and to let the smiles appear, that she might go away with the impression of unclouded gladness.

The very sight of her, when she was seen, clad in a simple white dress, walking up the aisle at Mr. Gordon's side, with her head bent down, a flush on either cheek, helped

to make the smiles predominate. The eldest of her girls acted as bridesmaid, and Dawson Schofield officiated as "best man" to Hiram. Amid profound silence Mr. Stapleton read the service, in his deep, sympathetic voice, no sound breaking the stillness excepting a solemn "Amen," uttered by a hundred tongues when the final benediction was pronounced.

Then came the signing of the register; then Hiram and his wife, arm in arm, walked through the intent and eager crowd; and while the organ made the old chapel vibrate with the jubilant strains of the "Wedding March," the girls strewed the way with flowers. And when the carriage drove away, it was followed by a hundred spoken or unspoken prayers that God would bless the man and woman who had given their lives to each other until death should them part.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER SEVEN YEARS.

"OH, mamma, mamma, he's tummin', he's tummin'," cried a little bright five-year-old boy, rushing in a state of the greatest excitement up the garden path to the foot of the short flight of stone steps leading to the verandah beneath which mamma was sitting.

"Papa, papa!" cried a second and younger child, clapping her hands and entering at once into her brother's excitement.

Charlotte, hastily putting aside her sewing materials, rose and stood listening in the vine-trellised verandah. The children, dancing with delight and eagerness, clamoured for permission to run and meet papa.

“Hiram, Lottie !” she said, laying her hand first on one child’s head and then upon the other’s. “Do be quiet. Let mamma listen.”

“I thaw the buggy, mamma,” burst out the youthful Hiram, after a moment’s silent pause. “Do let me tate Lottie to meet papa !”

“Yes, I hear the wheels, and Rover’s bark. You may go to the gate.”

Hand in hand the two children clambered down the steps and toddled at the greatest possible speed to which Lottie could attain ; until they reached the gate, where they stood screaming with pleasure as papa drove up. The great sheep-dog bounded around them with many a joyful bark ; and papa, handing over his horses to the care of a man, descended from the buggy, threw little Lottie high above his head, finally setting her on his shoulder, whilst Master Hiram, holding on by papa’s coat, trotted alongside,

and in this order the three marched up to the house.

Meanwhile Charlotte had been indoors to give some directions to the servants, and now stood in the doorway, framed as it were in creeping verdure, shading her eyes from the almost level rays of sunlight that struck upon her, and smiling a welcome which might have made glad the heart of any man. Her figure was fuller and rounder than of old, but the same stately grace which had made her noticeable in the Millvale days she still possessed.

The house, built against the gentle slope of a hill, was but one story high, and was surrounded on three sides by a verandah hung with vines, roses, and jasmine. The house itself seemed to be nestling amid gardens and orchards, with a background of gums and shea-oaks, the remains of the primeval forest, with which the hillside was clothed when the house was built. Sheds

and stabling might be seen beyond the gardens and orchards, the whole offering a picture of a successful squatter's ideal home.

"What have zoo b'ought for me and Hiwam?" said the maiden, holding on by her father's hair to preserve her balance.

"I've brought a papa," replied that gentleman. "Isn't that enough?"

"No, no, no!" screamed Hiram, junior, making great efforts to keep pace with his father, and look into his face at the same time. "My papa always brin's something nice for me and Lottie when he goes to Adelaide. What has zoo in zoor bag?"

"We'll see after dinner. There!" and he placed Lottie on her feet on the verandah, and lifted Master Hiram by his belt to the same level.

"I am so glad to see you," said Mrs. Hiram Greg, as she kissed her husband. "I only half expected you home to-night."

"I was determined to come. It would

have been something very pressing indeed that had detained me on this day of all others," he replied, returning her caress.

"Dinner will be ready in ten minutes," said Charlotte. "Now, children, do be good and leave papa alone. He is very tired and hungry, and he will play with you another time."

After dinner Hiram and Charlotte were seated on the verandah, the children climbing about their father's knees and trying to tempt him to a game of romps. But failing in this attempt, they transferred their attentions to a cat which opportunely appeared upon the scene, and left their elders in peace.

"Seven years," said Hiram, as he filled his pipe, "seven years since we were married. No, my dear, I could not be away from home to-day."

"How quickly the years have fled!" said Charlotte. "Sometimes it seems but yester-

day that I saw you standing by the superintendent's desk at Heather Street."

"The years have gone by so fleetly because they have been so happy," said her husband, looking fondly at his wife. "I could hardly have imagined such happiness as we have had."

"Nor could I," said Charlotte, as she clasped the hand which her husband laid upon her knee.

"And our prosperity, too—why, we have had no really serious losses; and now, so far as wealth is concerned, we can look forward to the future without fear."

"We have much to be grateful for, and I trust we are not ungrateful."

"But I have most cause for gratitude in such a wife as you, darling."

"Nay, I have the greater cause for thankfulness in such a husband."

From which it will be seen that the short courtship before marriage was more than

atoned for by its prolongation after marriage ; and that Mr. and Mrs. Hiram Greg did not fall into the mistake of many, and think it necessary to bring their love-making to an end as soon as the honeymoon came to a conclusion.

“ I must see the children into bed, and then I will come back and we will have a quiet talk, and you shall tell me all that you have seen and done in Adelaide.”

“ You have not asked about the letters,” said Hiram, when Charlotte returned to her place by his side ; “ I have a whole budget in my bag.”

“ I was too glad to see you to think even of the letters. You have read them, of course ? ”

“ Certainly, every word.”

“ All good news ? ”

“ Yes, all.”

“ Then we will leave them until we go indoors ; the air is too delicious, with just

enough breeze to move the leaves, to go in yet. Now, as to colonial news ? ”

“ The fight is fought and won, and we are to have a Parliament modelled on the home Parliament. ”

“ And you have been asked to become a candidate ? ” said Charlotte, eagerly.

“ I have, my dear—for the lower house, the House of Assembly. ”

“ And consented ? ”

“ And consented. ”

“ And you will win the election ? ”

“ There can be no reasonable doubt on that point ; I consider myself as good as elected already. ”

“ Then Mr. Stapleton’s prophecy will come true. ”

“ The children will be asleep now, ” said Hiram, after awhile ; “ I must go in to look at them, and then we will read the letters together. ”

He put his arm around her waist, and

they passed out of the shadows of the vine leaves, which the moonlight was throwing upon wall and floor, into the rooms where their children slept, and where news from the old land awaited them.

THE END.





